The Thief and the Sleeper

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The Thief and the Sleeper

by Burningstars98

Summary

When Rouge the Bat tried to steal the contents of a top secret research experiment, she wasn't expecting the contents to be a wounded, amnesiac hedgehog.

When Shadow woke up from stasis, he wasn't expecting to be the prisoner of a young thief trying to make it to the big leagues.

The two can't stand one another, but they may have to in order to avoid the government agents and villain sidekick on their tails.

Chapter 1: Ruined Amusement

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Darkness was the absence of light... It was cold... Empty... Still... Lonely...

...This was *not* that darkness. This was blinding light... searing heat... Motion that rattled him this way and that... But he was still alone.

He was falling. He was falling fast and hard like the shooting stars they... He'd seen... *sometime.*

Everything was shattered, pieces tumbling past him like glass shards. Images flickered in each shard, like fragmented thoughts, fragmented memory.

But one thing was constant... The voice whispering through the chaos...

Be brave... Live for me, okay...? Live for me... Be good...

And then another voice, panicked and crying, echoed like an explosion in his ears. Through the bright light searing his eyes, he saw a pair of red eyes looking back, a hand reaching out.

SHADOW!!!

It was suddenly all over, and Shadow's eyes flew open, but then shut again as pain rose up from his limbs in waves. His teeth clenched tightly as the pulse raced through his body... and then it faded, and he opened his eyes again.

He found himself staring up at metal; rusted metal with holes worn through. Flecks of sunlight broke through those holes, illuminating the... Wait, *sunlight?*

He sat up, though regretting it as his head swam. He felt like heavy weights had been placed on his arms and legs, but he moved them all the same-

-and then his left leg moved.

He clenched his teeth tightly again, grasping at his ankle as it felt like knives stabbed into it. Tears welled into his eyes, but he fought them back as he carefully shifted it to where he could sit properly, reaching his hand out from under the metal. As his fingers broke free of the shadow and into the light, he could feel the warmth radiating and moving through his glove to his palm. He crawled out a little further, letting it fall on him more and more. Fragments of the light seemed to dance around his arms... They never told him that the sun's light could fall like rain.

But then... Who were *'they?' Who* hadn't told him this?

The ground below him felt rough and scratchy and distracted him from pondering that question, and he looked down to see a sheet of dried plants covering the ground. It spread out across the ground- some areas denser than others- and then up to other pieces of metal that rose up into the sky, and to cracked, stone pathways that winded this way and that through the landscape.

"Grass..." He whispered, pulling some of the strands up and feeling them in his hand. Their fibers caught on his gloves, leaving little remnants even as he tried to scrub them clean by rubbing them together. "...Grass is supposed to be *green,* though. Because of chlorophyll."

How? How did he know that grass was green and not this sickly yellow color? What even *was* chlorophyll?

He looked up, towards where the sunlight was falling. The sky was a brilliant blue color, accompanied by wispy, white clouds that curled and broke apart into smaller clouds as they went... But shouldn't there be stars? Where were the stars? And the big, round, blue shape that occupied the sky?

He put his hands to his head; why did he *remember* all of this? How did he *know* all of this?

His ears pricked as he heard a low, moaning sound coming from his right. He opened his eyes and looked, seeing as a chilly breeze blew by, it moved a hanging piece of metal from one of the other structures. It creaked and moaned loudly as it shifted back and forth against the other, faded paint of blue chipping off and being blown far into the wind.

He looked around further; the structures were all in varying stages of disrepair. Wooden booths with their roofs caved in from erosion, metal fences that had supposedly kept people out had now toppled over and laid half-buried in the soil, towering metal machines whose rusted bases made them look as though they'd come toppling over at any moment.

He crawled out from under the one he'd apparently been resting under, not wanting to take any chances of that chunk falling on him. Where was he? How had he gotten there?

He heard a sound, like a sniffle, and he looked off to the side and saw another being similar to him, her legs tucked over a bar to let her hang upside down. Her big ears were folded back, a pair of leathery wings folded around her like a blanket as she slept; a *chiroptera*... A bat.

He grumbled as yet again his brain had given him a big word without telling him how he knew it. He knew what grass was, that the sky should be blue, but yet... It felt like he'd never actually seen these phenomenon before. He knew it, but it was all new to him.

But seeing the bat, it brought in a flicker of a memory... He *had* seen *her* before...

...The capsule. The compound he'd been in. She'd *saved* him! But... Why had he even *been* there? What had she rescued him *from?*

His left leg throbbed again, but not as badly as before, and he pulled himself up onto his feet. He needed to find out where they were, and he didn't want to be impolite and wake her... He'd look around on his own.

He limped away a few paces, looking at each structure and tried to determine its intent. One had a dome-like structure on the top, bits of it having shattered and fallen to the ground. On a number of arms were what appeared to be seats, dangling from chains. Some of the chains had broken and left the seat dangling on its side, others had dropped the seat completely and now blew limply in the wind.

Nearby was another tower, with rows of seats all around it in a ring. Faded colors made arrows pointing upward, suggesting that at one time, the ring would have lifted people sitting in those seats up into the air, high enough to see everything around them.

Below that was an old booth, with hooks on the back wall to hold something in place and a counter in the front. Something about all of this seemed... vaguely familiar. He knew what this place was, it was in the back of his head somewhere.
His eyes moved down to the counter, where something was mounted to it in several spots. Long... slender... *rifles.*

A flicker of a memory came flying into Shadow's head; he'd seen rifles before, they were *bad.* He saw someone pointing one at him, and all he felt was fear.

The hedgehog stumbled back onto the ground, yelping as his left leg throbbed again on the impact. The roughness of the grass didn't help much either as he tried to scoot away from the booth. He put his hands to his head, trying to shake away the nasty memory, to forget all about it-

"And where do you think *you're* going?"

Shadow opened his eyes, looking up and seeing the bat was awake now; probably from the noise he made in his fall. "I...I..." He looked around, "...I was trying to figure out where we are."

The bat rolled her eyes, "It's some old carnival grounds. Obviously, nobody's been here for years, so it seemed the perfect hiding spot for some sleep. *Thanks for the rude wake-up call, by the way...!*"

"I didn't mean to *wake* you, I just..."
He looked back at the booth, his brows furrowing a bit. "...I got startled."

"By what?"

Shadow pointed to the booth.

She looked, and then gave an amused grin. "What, *this?*"
She walked over and grabbed one of the rifles, waving it around. "It's a *laser* rifle, dude. Nothing to be scared of."

Shadow felt a little ashamed, but at the same time, he knew that his reaction hadn't entirely been his fault. Something else had triggered it... Something buried deep down.

The bat placed the rifle back down and then walked over to him, offering a hand. "Come on, I need to find some more goods to take back to The Guild, and I can't risk losing the biggest one I got."

Shadow was confused, but he took her hand, letting her help him up to his feet. He favored his left, hopping along with it in the air before catching himself on one of the fences still standing.

"Hey, what's up with your leg?"

Shadow shrugged, "Hurts to walk on it."

"You want me to carry you?"

Shadow frowned, "I think I will try to keep what dignity I have left, thank you, Miss Bat."

"Ugh. Don't *call* me that. It's Rouge, okay? *Just Rouge.*"

Shadow shrugged, and then saw a solid, wooden pole still lingering on one of the old booths. He hopped over to it, snapping it loose and then jumping as the roof then folded in on itself, slamming shut on the front of the booth with a loud bang.

Rouge just stared at him, "...You pull out the support beam, it's gonna *do* that. They fold on purpose, you know."

Shadow was still for a moment, still holding the pole in the air from where he'd taken it. He then slammed it down onto the ground and gripped it tightly as he used it like a walking stick and continued walking. "Well no, I *didn't* know that. I've never been to a... carnival grounds."

"Hmm."

"What's the difference?"

"Of what?"

"What's the difference between carnival ground and regular ground? Does it have something to do with why *this* grass is *yellow* and not *green?*"

"No! That's not what..." Rouge frowned, "...How *long* were you in that *box?*"

Shadow shrugged, "I don't really remember anything from *before* I woke up in the box."

"...Nothing."

Shadow shrugged again, and then continued to hobble along. "So, uh... Where are we going after this?"

"I am taking you back to The Guild. They assigned me the task of collecting you."

"Oh... I see... And why did they send you to collect me?"

"Oh, I dunno. But I'll bet you're worth a lot of bucks to 'em! Once the deal's done, I'm bound to not only get the respect I deserve, but also a fair share of the profits! What do you say to *that!?*"
Rouge had turned back towards the hedgehog, but Shadow was already running. "Hey, get back here!"

Shadow refused, hobbling as fast as he could down through the rusty shapes filling the landscape. He needed to hide.

Things were starting to come together. He was wanted. She was a thief. She hadn't saved him, she'd simply stolen him from his previous prison only to put him in another one.

He wasn't going to let it happen... He needed to hide.

She was coming up behind him, but his fear held down the pain, allowing him to run further. Suddenly he heard a loud clang, and turned to see she'd not been looking where she was going- with her focus on *him*- and had run straight into one of the structures.

Normally, he figured he would have gone back to make sure she was okay, but he was a little busy *running away from her* right now.

Up ahead he saw a large building, still somewhat in good condition. Perhaps he could hide in there. He limped towards the entrance, looking up at the letters over the door for a moment.

H__S_ _F __R__RS

That told him absolutely nothing, but he hurried inside the dark structure, into a series of winding halls and decaying walls.

Then he heard her voice coming from outside, quite angry, and understandably so.

"Oh that is it! You're gonna *pay* for that, Quill Pickle!"

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaaaand we're back! Focusing on these two nerds for a little bit, hope you enjoy this first chapter!

Their relationship's off to a great start XD

Chapter 2: Shattered Memory, Fractured Past

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Well, *this* wasn't going as well as Rouge had been hoping.

She knew she should restrained him in some form, but he was out cold with no way of knowing when he'd come to; now she was smacking herself for deciding against it before, because despite being disabled and limping around with a stick... He was still rather *fast.*

She'd taken off after him, but he was still keeping ahead of her, and she was focused enough on him that she wasn't looking ahead of her properly-

-*CLANG!*

Her vision went to static and her ears rung as she ran into the side of one of the metal sheets. The next thing she knew she was on her back, staring up at the remains of a *Tilt-A-Whirl,* and every part of her body aching, but especially her nose.
She sat up, rubbing her face with her hands before pulling them back and finding flecks of red on her palms. "Oh...Oh that's it!" she hollered as she got up to her feet, "You're gonna *pay* for that, Quill Pickle! You'll be red, black, and *blue* by the time I'm finished with you!"

She searched the area for any sign of the rogue hedgehog, but while she saw nothing definite, she had a feeling he'd gone into the building ahead. She flapped her aching wings a little harder, and then flew in through the front door. Almost immediately she found the walls shifting from ugly, torn wallpaper into sheets of glass in various shapes and forms; a House of Mirrors.

"Not bad..." She hummed with a smirk, almost impressed with his choice of hiding spot. "...But you'll still lose this fight! I can still find you... I can *hear* you... Your breathing...!"

She had no problem hearing his breathing; in fact, it was almost *deafening* as it bounced off of the walls. She gave a chirp, but all she got back were the echoes of a million mirrors bouncing it back at her. Dozens of rooms with seemingly no doors. "Alright then... The hunt is on."

He wouldn't be continuously running through the halls, he'd probably stop and try to hide somewhere. In a House of Mirrors, nobody would know which you was the real you... And your reflections would seem to be looking back at you from all angles.

Project Shadow would get himself lost in this maze of glass and reflection... She'd find him eventually.

She happened to look in one of the mirrors and rolled her eyes, "Speaking of looking from *all angles...Yikes.*"

The bat sighed, adjusting her suit in her reflection. She tugged where it clung to her hips, and tucked it down into the tops of her boots so there was no wrinkles. She smoothed down the front of the leotard, tugging on the straps to settle it back into a more proper position. Why did it always sag in the front like that? She didn't have anything up front to pull it down! Or hold it up, she supposed.

She patted the pocket where the mysterious glowing stone was once again packed away; she *wouldn't* be letting the hedgehog get a hold of it again, especially now that he was actually *trying* to get away from her.

She then removed her jacket to adjust the back of the leotard in the mirror, and then paused.

In the reflection, she saw the blaring difference between her black thief uniform and the white of her fur, and she winced, quickly putting the jacket back on and tugging the sleeves down over the tops of her gloves. She wanted to hide as much of the white as possible... She *had to.*

Still trying to pretend we belong, are we?

"Shut up." She hissed, her ears folding down against her head as the voice spoke. "I'm not... I'm *not.*"

Still trying to convince yourself? Pathetic.

"Shut up!"

She looked back towards the mirror, her chest heaving and her breath fogging up the glass. She didn't see the reflection of a confident, well-established thief, she found herself staring back at a little bat, standing at the front of a cave and looking out... As if she expected someone to come back for her... As if she had *hope* that they would come back for her.

Her head grew hot and fuzzy, her breaths felt caught in her chest as it tightened, tears stung in her eyes. She wanted to pretend, she wanted to be happy with the way she was, but the next thing she knew, she was surrounded by shattered glass as she kicked through every single mirror in the corridor. Broken shards lay all around her, her screams still echoing down the hall and into the rest of the House of Mirrors.

"I'm not...!" she hissed, scrubbing the tears from her eyes and brushing tiny pieces of glass from her suit. "...I'm not. I'm gonna *finish* this mission...! I am going to be the greatest thief in the galaxy...! I will make *The Guild* proud...!"

How could one place hold so many reflective surfaces? It seemed like every wall had a mirror- *was* a mirror.

Shadow could not figure out how someone could want to see themselves and their own reflection so badly to do this... but he didn't have a lot of time to think it over, he was still on the run, after all.

He hobbled along, trying his best to remain quiet despite the pain in his leg coming back. He really should stop walking on it eventually to let it heal... But something, something deep in the crevasses of his mind, was suggesting that even rest wouldn't do him much good. He needed help, and not Rouge's kind of help.

She was somewhere behind him, whispering threats and telling him there was nowhere to run. She was probably right; that door he used to enter may be the only one to this place, and the halls were quite narrow, so even if his leg *wasn't* injured, he had a feeling it would be impossible to get up to a full sprint in here without running into something.

He was wondering what to do next when the wall he was leaning against suddenly budged. He pulled his hand away, finding that one of the mirrors was now tilted inward a bit; a hidden door to another space. Perhaps he could hide in there until she'd passed on and then go back out the way he came in.

It was worth a shot; if not he supposed he could use his walking stick as a weapon for a little bit.

She seemed distracted by something now, as she was yelling at someone else, so he quickly pushed the door open, hobbled into the next room and closed the door behind him.

This room was also full of mirrors, but varying kinds. Some were warped to make the reflection smaller, others larger. There was one that appeared normal in comparison to everything else, a mirror that showed what he guessed he looked like. He hadn't really thought too much about his own appearance in the last few minutes he'd been awake... Gosh, had it only been a few minutes?

His memory only lasted a few minutes, and even the beginning of those moments was growing blurry and confusing. Why? Why couldn't he remember before he woke up? Why couldn't he remember who he was and where he came from?

He looked back at himself in the mirror, at a pair of eyes that seemed so tired and worn... lost, even. He walked over to the mirror, putting a hand up and watching his reflection do the same. *"...Who am I...?"* He whispered, but sadly, his reflection was asking the same question.

You are very handsome...

Shadow looked up, and behind him in his reflection was a girl with long, golden hair. He whipped around to face her, but she wasn't there in the flesh... only in the reflection.

The girl smiled as she bent down, her head now beside his. *A very handsome little hedgehog, huh? You get all grown up, and the girl hedgehogs will blush when you walk by.*

"W-Who are you...?" He asked softly, "...How do you *know* me...?"

She seemed familiar... her voice comforting to him, like a blanket. Was she someone he'd known before the compound? Perhaps he could find her and ask her what happened to him.

His eyes moved back to his own reflection, and his eyes widened as he saw it changing. Coming off of it were strands of gold color, the color creeping up through his black fur. Strand by strand, little by little, he was going from black and red, to *gold* and red- but only in the reflection.

His thoughts moved back, back to the vague memory of what he'd seen when he first awoke in the carnival grounds. A pair of red eyes, desperate as they reached out for him and cried out his name... He wouldn't be crying out and reaching for *himself*... Had there been someone else with him before? Another like him who could turn golden? Another... Hedgehog?

Green...Hills...Go...

The voice was new and soft, like a whisper. It seemed to come from all around him, but he was still alone in the room of mirrors.

"Green Hills... There are a *lot* of those, I'm sure." He argued, "Is it a place? Why do I need to go there?"
He pressed his hands against the mirror, looking back at the golden hedgehog. "Please... I don't *understand!* How do I get there? Which way is-"

"Gotcha!"

Shadow yelped as Rouge was suddenly behind him, grabbing him around the arms and torso. He might've been able to keep his balance if not for his wounded leg, but he used it to his advantage instead. He lifted his legs up, putting his good leg up against the wall between the mirrors and shoved off, forcing him up and his weight to come pressing down on Rouge from above.

The bat yelped as she stumbled, and then fell backwards onto her back. The wind knocked out of her, she released him to try and recover, and Shadow scrambled across the floor, grabbing his walking stick that he'd dropped when she'd grabbed him. He scooted up against the wall, holding the stick out in front of him. "Alright, alright!" He shouted, "We can make a deal, Thief!"

"Oh...!"
Rouge rolled over onto her side, glaring at him as she took in wheezing breaths. "...Oh yeah...!?" she gasped, "...what *kind* of deal...!?"

"O-Okay... So I guess I *do* owe you something for helping me get out of that compound back there and everything, but I'm still not really okay with this... So... I'll go with you, but you gotta promise me you won't tie me up or hurt me, okay? You don't hurt me, and... I won't run anymore."

Rouge laid on her side for a moment, her eyes shifting to the floor. She looked deep in thought, and honestly, he didn't blame her if she didn't trust him to keep his word.

"...And to be fair," He added, "...You running into that metal sign was *your* fault, not mine."

Stating this probably wasn't going to make the situation better, but he felt it needed to be said.

"...You'll go with me to the hideout, if I don't hurt you or tie you up." Rouge repeated back the conditions.

Shadow nodded, "...I have a feeling I'll be safer wandering around here with you than *without* at this point... I don't even know where here *is*."

"...Fine, but no more running me into metal signs, got it?"

"I just said-"

"I know what you said, and you're *wrong.* If you hadn't ran, I wouldn't be *chasing* you, and if I hadn't been *chasing* you, I would've been looking where I was *going.*"

"And if you weren't a sneaky little thief who's trying to use me to get a big score, I wouldn't have ran."

"Hey, I'm the best thief in the galaxy, thank you very much!"

"Sure. Keep telling yourself that."

"*I will!*"

"Fine."

"Fine!"

Shadow lowered his stick and then pulled himself up onto his feet, wandering towards the door. Rouge led the way, marching down the hall to the left. "Um... The exit's to the right-"

"*I knew that!*"

"Sure you did..."

Chapter End Notes

Sometimes you gotta work with other people to make progress, even if you don't like them and they don't like you.

Chapter 3: Ground Rules

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

By the time Rouge finally decided to guide him through this maze of broken-down attractions and out of this place, it was well into the afternoon. Was Shadow surprised? No, not really.

In the meantime, Shadow was stuck sitting around, trying to get his thoughts in order. He had been in a compound, locked away. Why? Was he dangerous? He didn't feel dangerous... What did Rouge's bosses want with him? Why was she so eager to please them that she'd kidnap someone?

Then again, he wasn't sure if it was kidnapping so much as *stealing,* considering he was practically in storage before that time... What kind of person locked another person in storage?

He needed context, a *lot* of context, and if Rouge had any of it, she wasn't exactly in a sharing mood. Nor was she in the mood for him to share what he'd seen and heard in the House of Mirrors. A girl treating him kindly, another golden hedgehog calling out for him... a voice calling him out to go to some place called Green Hills.

Finally, as the sun was beginning to sink towards the horizon, Rouge decided it was time to go and *'find some free samples,'* she said.

"Free samples..." Shadow mumbled under his breath as he limped after her, "...Sounds like more thievery to me."

"If it's thievery, than why do they make it so easy by putting it outside where everyone has access to it?"

"Table scraps?"

"Dumpsters, doofus."

Shadow paused, his brows furrowing. "Could you stop calling me names? I have one, and I'd prefer you *use* it."

"Yeah, well *I'd* prefer we keep moving. And try not to make so much noise, you'll give us away to the humans."

"Is that such a *bad* thing? Maybe *they'd* actually tell me what's going on here."

"Oh yeah? Why don't you try talking to one? See what happens."

Shadow stood up a little straighter, "...Maybe I *will.*"
He took in a deep breath, though he wasn't really going to call out for anyone else. Still, it was enough to make the bat whip around and rush over, covering his mouth.

"No no no! I was being *sarcastic...!*" She hissed desperately, and Shadow released the breath in a hard huff. "Dude, seriously. *Nobody* can know we're here."

Shadow pulled her hand loose from his muzzle, "Why not? What's going on? Why are we hiding like this?"

"Look. The place I took you from was a government base, and if they find us, they will lock *both of us* up in capsules, not to mention that most humans don't even know we exist."

"Why?"

"Because we're not common to this world. There's just us, and a lot of average joes are walking around with pistols strapped to their hips and ready to fire at anything that freaks them out, and trust me, we'd freak them out!"

"Why did the government have me locked up in the first place?"

"Maybe they thought you were dangerous? I don't know, but it doesn't matter. We just need to get back to the Hideout, and then the Guild will keep both of us out of trouble."

"You've got me all confused here. First, you tell me that The Guild intends to *sell me* and you get some of the profits, and now you're acting like they'd *protect me* from other humans? Make up your-"

Shadow was cut off as Rouge's foot moved onto his bad one, and sharp pain shot up through his leg. He tried to yelp, but it was also cut off by Rouge's hand slapping over his mouth, leaning more on his foot as she did so, and causing more pain. Golden sparks burst up from his quills as he whined, shooting upwards and causing a nearby street light to burst in a shower of sparks and shattered glass.

"What're you *doing!?*" Rouge hissed, "You're gonna-"

Shadow ripped her hand away, "Off my foot!" He cried.

"Your...Oh!"
Rouge stepped back, and Shadow crumpled to the ground as the pressure was gone and the pain began to ease, though it still throbbed sharply. "Sorry, I didn't mean to-"

Shadow wiped pained tears from his eyes, swallowing hard as his head tried to spin. "It...It was an accident, I know...!" he hissed, "...but this isn't going to make our progress much better..."

"Right... Right." Rouge sighed, wrapping her arms around herself and avoiding eye contact with him. "...Must be more than just a cramp, huh...?"

Shadow nodded, and then got up from the ground. "Ergh...Come...Come on... If we need to avoid humans, then we need to not be here when they come to look at that busted light."

"You read my mind..."

She led the way, and Shadow hopped on one foot along the way, not trying to put his injured foot down much as they wandered into the darker shadows of the trees and bushes surrounding the abandoned amusement park.

He should have been more careful, he should have checked every possible alarm and made sure they were disabled.

He would've been more careful... *He* would've made that heist without so much as a *mouse* knowing he was there...

Finding the compound's location had been easy enough with some eavesdropping, and infiltrating the compound's security team had been simple, seeing as Commander Walters had been all too eager to hire as many men as he could to make sure nobody entered the compound and tried to set Project Shadow free. He was so desperate to get those extra guards that with a little name switching and a forged resume that was barely looked at, Stone had slipped into the ranks without so much as an odd look.

Project Shadow... That had been his target. The creation of Professor Gerald Robotnik, the grandfather of his beloved Doctor... Following his disappearance, Stone had sworn revenge on that blue hedgehog and his new allies, and he would use this powerful weapon to enact it.

If only some other pathetic lifeform hadn't gotten to it first.

Seconds. It had been mere seconds. The doors to the most secure portion of the facility had opened, only to reveal an empty capsule, and a bent-up air vent hatch suggesting their manner of escape.

Agent Stone had disabled the cameras for his own extraction, so he had no visual footage to go off of, but they had gotten audio, and investigation of the air ducts had been made to find that portions of one section were... *warped,* like the metal had been pulled in and twisted like taffy. It was so smooth, it was almost like the metal had been formed that way when it was still hot, not ripped apart at the rivets like it should have been.

Stone had gotten a copy of the audio play-out from the room before he made his great escape, and now he sat in a tiny camper in an RV park, the lights out but his face lit up by the screen of a laptop computer, headphones covering his ears as he listened carefully to the audio. This RV had been his home during the time he wasn't actively watching the hedgehog from his place at the Mean Bean, and much like the coffee house's outward appearance, it seemed normal and common to anyone that walked by, but hidden in its walls was technology a gamer could only dream of.

Agent Stone slowly turned a dial, increasing some sounds and quieting others.

He had been able to determine two voices speaking, a male and female. Now, he needed to figure out what they were saying.

Whrrrrr... Like I'm gonna...happen! You're... Pickle!

A-Alright...-ag me!

You first.

Why?

Because... expect you... go first!

It was hard to get all of the dialogue under the hisses of machinery and the blaring alarms in the background, but it was definitely a male and female having conversation, perhaps over how to get Project Shadow back out of the compound.

They also sounded young... perhaps even teenagers. Yes, the male's voice was definitely cracking a bit from what he could tell. He'd evaluated the sizes of the ducts, how small they were; no human could fit their way through there, not a human of average size, anyway. Perhaps a dwarf, but something told the man that this wasn't the case.

However, he *was* aware of a *humanoid* form that might be able to fit without any problems... The aliens of Sonic's world, and that only enraged him about this even more. It had been bad enough that the red echidna warrior had abandoned the Doctor's side and teamed up with the hedgehog, but if more of them were continuing to arrive and continued to go to Sonic's view of things... When Doctor Robotnik returned- *which he would*- he might have to face down an entire *army* of children with powers they couldn't account for.

But then there was that... *Children.* So far, not a single adult from their world had arrived. They were all young, inexperienced, innocent for the most part- he wasn't quite sure how innocent the echidna was. They weren't grown up and trained for battle... trained by the *best*.

A smile formed on Agent Stone's lips for a moment, he could do this... If he managed to hide out in plain sight of the hedgehog for months, then he could certainly expose these adolescent aliens' weaknesses and exploit them to his advantage... now, if only he could get a fix on-

A ping from another monitor caught his attention, and he looked up to see a flashing beacon on the screen.

Energy Pulse detected.

Agent Stone set the laptop aside and wandered over to the other console to examine the readings.
He was smarter than the Doctor gave him credit for- not as brilliant as the Doctor, but that was not the point. Even with the limited exposure he'd had to the Master Emerald's power and frequency, he had been able to define it enough to form a scanner for its pulses. It was primitive, but further study of the energy would solve that problem. It had picked up a high amount of the energy coming from Green Hills a short time ago, a few months in between, but considering what he'd seen Sonic do in the past, he did not want to investigate it without considerably intense preparation beforehand.

But this pulse, it had come from somewhere else entirely, from just outside a small town in South Dakota, and about a hundred miles from Agent Stone's own location.

Far enough away that the likelihood of Sonic finding it was limited, but close enough that the thieves might get to Green Hills shortly if he wasn't quick. Or worse, the government would get to them and then he'd be back to square one.

He gave a nod, "Do not worry, Doctor... When you return, I will have your empire ready to follow your command..."

Chapter End Notes

Geez, this chapter was stuck at 60 words long for weeks because I didn't know what to do with it XD Glad I got out of that rut, I think it's the "working retail during the holidays" that's got my brain so uninspired.

Chapter 4: Debriefing

This was the most frustrating mission report Agent Tower had ever been forced to attend.

It was no secret to anyone who had been present for the event that what occurred at the Wachowski home had not gone as planned or even imagined, and- as usual- Agent Tower felt that he had not been given all of the information he should have been given.

The mission was to investigate the Wachowski residence and uncover the reason behind their recent purchases of things such as a crib and proper high-chair. He was told they were going to enter the home, ask a few questions, get the answers to those questions, and then report back.

Not once had there been any suggestion that physical force would be *needed* or *used*, and yet, the moment Commander Walters saw the little toddler, he'd thrown procedure out the window and tried to- in the commanding officer's own words- '*Apprehend*' him... Leading to Walters, Tower, and Agent Olson being trapped in a pocket of time and space.

As one of the officers present for the mission, he had to stand there and listen to Commander Walters give his report, all without speaking or sharing his perspective unless given permission by Walters.

Walters never *gave* him that permission, probably because of Tower speaking out of line back in the crumbling castle and questioning his actions.

Listen and obey, that was what they wanted Tower to do, and never question or ask for more details, even if it meant preventing the situation getting out of hand.

According to Commander Walters, this was how the event had gone: They approached the home and began to question the family, and then Sonic became defensive and had initiated another burst that had disabled their equipment, explaining the lack of contact or radio signal for a period of time.

This, of course, was only *partially* true. Sonic *had* gotten defensive, but not in an aggressive manner, rather in the manner of an older sibling trying to protect and comfort the frightened infant. The soldiers had shot first, and sadly, Tower had to admit he had been one of those to pull the trigger. The burst of energy had *not* been *Sonic's* however, and an electrical outage was *not* the cause for the lack of communication...

Tower squirmed in place, trying to stand at attention and keep himself restrained. His jaw clenched, his tongue pressing against the top of his mouth to try and keep from blurting out the truth.

His mind slipped back to the moments as they were heading out. As they'd been freed and Commander Walters ordered him and Olson out of the house, Tower had been certain he'd seen two pairs of ears peeking up from the inside of Sheriff Wachowski's truck. Upon a quick look, he'd seen them- another hedgehog and what looked like a cat- hiding from the soldiers

inside. When one of his comrades had asked, he had told them that he was checking the truck for anything else they should know about... and that there was *none*.

It was quite clear now to Tower that the less Walters *knew* about these extra two aliens, the *safer* they would be-

"Agent Tower."
The man looked up as the officers seated at the table all looked in his direction, "You look as though you have something to say on the matter."

Agent Tower bit his lip, silently wishing he had a better poker face than he did. "...I do, Sir. However, I am concerned it may be considered out of line for me to speak, and will be detrimental to this meeting if I present my case at this time."

"Hmm... Very well." One of them tapped a stack of papers on the table to straighten them again. "If so, then we shall move onto the next issue at hand... There was a break-in at Compound 98 last night."

All attention went back to the men, and Commander Walters' stance got stiffer than it already was- which honestly was rather impressive. "...What?"

"A hacker successfully disabled the majority of our alarms and broke into the central containment facility. An emergency lockdown was initiated for the entire compound, but somehow the assailant managed to escape out of the compound with Project Shadow in tow. As of this moment, we are attempting to locate the project's energy signature in order to pursue and recapture it."

Tower's ears pricked upwards, a habit he'd unintentionally developed in his youth whenever something intrigued him. Project Shadow was free and on the loose? He knew very little about the project, and if not for his grandfather, he wouldn't know *anything* about it. The confusion on his fellow agents' faces told him they were utterly clueless as to why this seemed important.

Commander Walters stepped forward quickly, "Sirs, if I may-"

"If you're going to suggest yourself to lead the search once we have a lead, *request denied,* Commander."

The man seemed quite startled by this, "...Sirs, I have-"

"-Too much of an emotional investment to the project and its origins for the task. We need someone with no ties to lead this assignment, which is why we have chosen Colby to lead the mission once we have it located."
"We only told you about this because I have no doubt it will be making its rounds around the radio and you should be informed of such things. However, we have made our decision."

This decision quite irritated the man, but he gave a sharp nod. "Of course."

"Hmm... Dismissed."
The officers began to disperse, but then they spoke again, "Agent Tower, a moment alone, if you please."

Tower paused, returning to his place and standing at attention once more. "Sirs."

They waited a moment for the door to be closed behind them, leaving him alone with the men at the table, before speaking up. "Now that Commander Walters has left the room, permission to speak freely over your previous mission."

Tower relaxed just a bit, wanting to use his hands to talk but keeping them at his sides. "Sirs, with all due respect to the Commander... I am uncertain he is the most *suitable* choice for handling assignments engaging with these particular aliens."

"Please elaborate."

Agent Tower swallowed and tried to keep his tone calm and informal. "We are aware of the initial activities revolving around the alien known as Sonic when he first made himself known via the blackout. It was Commander Walters' idea to send in Robotnik, a decision the majority of you disagreed with."

"Ugh... Don't *remind* us..." One of them muttered.

"Following those events, attempts were made to cover up his actions. The same is spoken of *Operation Catfish,* which was risky at best to begin with. It was through sheer luck that Sonic and the other aliens even *arrived* to the ambush site in Hawaii, and the additional time spent trying to apprehend them led to Robotnik gaining significant ground against us back in Green Hills."

"Go on..."

"This past event *also* went rather poorly... We uncovered the Wachowskis are now are caring for a *fourth* alien individual; an *infant* hedgehog, much like Sonic. It has become clear over time that abilities exceeding that of humans are commonplace in their race, and this infant was no exception. However, despite knowing this, Commander Walters did not engage with caution. He attempted to remove the infant from the home by force, which led to the infant unleashing a tantrum that imprisoned those inside the home's walls for a time. With time, we were able to calm the infant to the point of him releasing us, but this may have been avoided if the Commander had assessed the situation beforehand instead of rushing in and expecting little to no resistance."

"Tell me, Agent. What would you suggest should have been done differently?"

Agent Tower stood up a little straighter, "If we are going to continue to evaluate these aliens and learn what they are capable of, I believe it will require a new approach. Since it seems it will be a challenge to take the aliens from the Wachowskis to evaluate them in a controlled environment, perhaps *we* will have to go to *them* instead. Perhaps assign one or two agents to reside in Green Hills, and to observe them on a day-to-day basis. If the only data we get is

from observing them in situations where they feel threatened or agitated, we will not get a full view of their behavior."

"And... you would volunteer *yourself* for such a mission?"

"Only if the council deems me acceptable. I have no wife, children, or even pets that would need to adjust. I would only need to move myself from one place to another, perhaps take on a part-time job so I can get observations of the aliens with the entire community as well."

"Hmm..." The council murmured to one another, and then turned back to them. "We will have to deliberate on this."

Any sort of progress was better than none; if they could find a way to learn more about the aliens without stressing them out, then perhaps they could get more information on further aliens that would *eventually* arrive. Agent Tower had a feeling that it was only a matter of time. More were coming, and when they did, they needed a plan in place.

The men nodded slowly to each other, and then looked back to the young man. "Very well, we will inform you when we have come to a decision... Dismissed, Agent Tower."

"Thank you, Sirs."

Agent Tower hurried out of the room, quickly marching down the hall and away from the room. He needed a nice, long shower and a hot meal after a mission and day like this.

The news of Project Shadow's escape lingered in the back of his mind as he walked, as it left him very curious. He had a feeling that he would not be assigned the task of hunting it down either, for similar reasons to his commanding officer. Information on the project was limited, left to high above his pay-grade in the ranks, but bits had been given to him from *first-hand accounts.*

His grandfather, Abraham Tower the First, had grown up on the base where Project Shadow was built, and had been just a young boy when... *Something* had happened. Dozens had died, others arrested, and those that made it out with their lives and livelihoods were sworn to secrecy. His grandfather never talked about any of it under swear of oath... that is, he never did *sober.*

By the time Agent Tower had come along, his grandfather had developed a tendency to drink a little too much at family gatherings. When that happened, he often crashed in his armchair, muttering things in his sleep and occasionally shouting at the football games on TV. Every so often, his little grandson would sit by him, listening to his mutterings... and he would hear little remnants of those days.

He would mutter things about a girl named Maria, a girl that he always spoke affectionately of and how he should've been born a little earlier so he'd have a chance. He mumbled about some of the grownups never letting him in the inner ring so he could see what was in the labs, chasing him with brooms. But most of all, he would whisper something about Project Shadow... But he never *called* it Project Shadow... Just *Shadow.* Like it was a living thing... Like it was a *person.*

Agent Tower wanted to know, he wanted to know what- or even perhaps *who*- this Shadow was, and why it was so important that their name couldn't be spoken in public... If he was careful and vigilant, maybe he would find out... He needed to keep his ears open for any news.

Chapter 5: Ups and Downs

The pair wasn't making as good a time as Rouge would have liked, but she'd tried to speed it up by picking Shadow up and it had ended with him squirming and distracting her so that she crashed into *another sign.*

He seemed to be good at making her do that.

"You have got to stop doing that, Quill Pickle." She groaned, rubbing her nose.

Shadow sat on the ground with arms crossed and lip sticking out like a perturbed toddler. "Not my fault." He muttered, "You should have warned me you were going to do that."

"I don't have to tell you *everything* I'm going to do!"

"Oh, *yes you do!* How else am I supposed to-"

Rouge waved him off, flying up and lifting the lid of a nearby dumpster open. The cloud of stench hit her nose like a freight train and she gagged, but fought past it to dig through the giant box for anything still somewhat fresh.

Shadow wrinkled his nose as the smell got to him as well, "Ugh... I am *not* eating anything that came out of that box."

"Fine, then you can *starve.*"

"Fine."

"Fine!"

The word *'Fine'* was getting thrown around a lot, too.

Rouge perched on the edge of the dumpster, fishing through the items with one hand and holding the lid open with the other... that is, until one of her legs slipped. She yelped as she tumbled into the pile of trash, the lid slamming shut on her and plunging her into darkness. "Ugh! Hey!"
She tried to lift the lid, but the trash under her shifted and shuffled, preventing her from getting a good position to shove off from. Her boots kicked at the plastic lid, popping it up a few inches each time, but always falling back down. "Hey! Get me out of here! *Shadow!"*

Well, this was just great. While she was stuck in there, he was probably making a break for it. Yes, he'd be hobbling his way down the sidewalk by now, leaving his captor behind.

A few minutes passed, and then she heard a soft grunt, and then a thump against the side of the dumpster. A few seconds later, the lid was flung open, slamming into the wall behind it by Shadow using his walking stick to knock it upwards. He appeared over the side, offering a hand. "Come on."

"You... You didn't run away?"

Shadow's brows furrowed, "I promised I wouldn't, and I *keep* my promises. Well," He shrugged, "As far as I am *physically capable* of keeping them."

Rouge took his hand and he pulled her back out of the dumpster, climbing back down off of the milk crate he'd stood on to reach. "Well, this one didn't have anything worth eating in it anyway... I guess we'll *both* just-"
She looked down as Shadow held out an opened, but fresh bag of potato chips. "...Where did you *find* this?" She flipped it over, "They aren't even expired yet."

"A human." Shadow mumbled, putting some of them in his mouth. "Wearing a green, woven hat, baggy pants, and he smelled weird."

Rouge blinked, "...A crackhead just hands you a bag of chips."

Shadow shrugged, "He didn't seem scared of me."

"He probably thought you were part of his drug-induced high. Whatever." Rouge took the bag and shoved a handful into her face, "Come on, we're only a little bit from the hideout now."

"Great, and then once you're back where *you* belong, I can be on my way."

"Uh excuse me? When was *that* the deal!?"

"You said so yourself. I go with you to the hideout without trying to escape, and you don't hurt me, but we never said that I had to *stay* once I got there."

"Ha! Like the Guild would let you get away that easily."

"Hand over the glowing rock in your pocket, and I'll *show you* how fast I can get away."

Rouge's humored look disappeared, and she placed a hand over the pocket in question, "Nice try, Quill Pickle."

Shadow crossed his arms with a smirk, "It was worth a try, *Baton Rouge...!*"

"Pssh... Do you even know what Baton Rouge *is?*"

"It's the capital city of Louisiana, and rests on the shore of the Mississippi River."

"...How do you *know that?*"

Shadow shrugged, and then they both turned as they heard movement. A human was standing in the front of the alley, a can of beer in one hand and staring at them with a glazed expression. Shadow waved at the human, and he waved back.

"Sup, little spaceman...?" he mumbled, "Where's your spaceship...?"

"Spaceman..." Rouge muttered, and then took Shadow's hand. "Come on, we've got to keep moving before we're noticed by someone *not* on drugs..."

"But if they *do*..." Shadow waved his walking stick about, "Thwack, thwack, right?"

"Erm... Bullets kinda trump stick. Sorry."
The amused expression on the hedgehog's face vanished almost immediately, dropping off into wide, distant eyes looking at the ground. Rouge paused, smacking her forehead as she remembered his startled expression from the laser rifle back at the fairgrounds. He was afraid of guns and bullets, so she needed to keep from mentioning them. She squeezed his hand a little tighter in reassurance, "B-But that's not gonna happen. It'll be fine, right?"

"...Right..." Shadow mumbled, finally looking up at her. "...Right. Let's go."

Rouge's words had struck something, if only Shadow could recall what it had been.

Guns... Bullets... They played some important role in his history, but whenever he heard or saw them, the resulting memory was there and gone before he had a chance to properly acknowledge it. Like a leaf on the wind, brushing his cheek and then being ripped away into the swirling air, it was a memory- one with *emotional value*- that refused to be grasped.

He had to wonder if there was a reason, a cause for him to keep his own memories away from him. Was his old life so bad? Had it been so hard and miserable that his *own mind* refused to allow him to think about it?

Rouge led him through alleyways and small trails between buildings, pulling him back behind dumpsters and walls whenever a human approached. They seemed rather fascinating, not like him, and not like Rouge. They were the odd ones here, but why? Why weren't there more like them?

After several moments of pondering this, he decided to ask. "Why aren't we like humans?"

"Because we're not human."

"But why?"

Rouge didn't really answer the question, instead mumbling something about him acting like a toddler with such questions. Shadow quieted down again, deciding to save further questions for later.

The further they walked, the less human activity they encountered. The buildings grew larger, but spread further apart, broken up by large patches of road and fields surrounding blocks of concrete and metal. The road led to open spaces of concrete, striped with lines of white in rectangular shapes. "What're those boxes for?"

"They're parking spaces, it's a parking lot."

"For transportation vehicles?"

"Yes."

"Then why are they *empty?*"

"Because the Guild takes pride in avoiding detection. This place used to be a factory of some kind, before we took it over. Now come on."

Shadow winced as she tugged him along into the alley between two of the buildings, approaching the smaller of the two and pressing a series of numbers on buttons by the door. An irritating buzz came from it, and then she tried again. Another buzz.

"Oh come on, don't tell me they changed the code while I was gone again...!" she hissed.

Shadow took this moment to relax a bit, leaning against the wall and watching the bat fiddle with the buttons over and over. "Did you try all of the *old codes?*"

"That's what I'm doing now, dimwit...!"

Shadow was still for a moment, and then hobbled over to the door. "Let me try."

"Oh, like you're gonna get the code for a secret thief organization's HQ on the first try." Rouge threw her hands up, "But fine, knock yourself out."

Shadow looked over the buttons for a moment, and then pressed his hand over the pad of numbers. There was a flicker of gold from his hand, the same gold that had taken out the lights a short time ago, and then the door chimed and clattered, popping open with a loud creak. "Taadaa..." he hummed with some pride in his tone.

Rouge stared at the door, "...You just... *huh.*"
She walked over to the door and pulled it open a bit more. "You may be worth something to the Guild *after all,* Quill Pickle."

Shadow hobbled after her, entering an almost silent space after the door clattered shut behind them. Flickering artificial lights, igniting a bland room of gray walls and bland carpet. "So far, this world has been a lot more... blah, than I was expecting."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Shadow shrugged, "I guess I just expected more... swirling colors and spontaneous action, not brown grass, and gray, creepy rooms like this."

"Hmm. Normal to me."
Rouge looked around and then went to a set of doors, pressing another button. "Come on, we'll take the elevator."

"Erm..." Shadow pointed to a big paper sign over the doors, "That says the elevator is *out of order.*"

"Eh, it just says that to keep snoops from finding the base downstairs. Besides, if we try to take the stairs with this hobbling of yours, it'll take us *all night* to get down there."

Shadow bit his lip, looking at the doors as they opened and a bell gave a sad and pathetic whine. This was a bad idea, this was *absolutely* a bad idea, but she had a point; there was no way he was going to make it down flights of stairs like this- not quickly or easily, anyway.

He entered the elevator and immediately wanted to jump back out. He grasped the bar on the edge, his legs trembling under him.

"It's fine." Rouge complained, "Nothing's going to happen."

"I-It's not that...!" Shadow closed his eyes tightly, trying to slow his breathing and stay calm. "I just... I don't think I like small, enclosed spaces...!"

"Hmm. Probably from being in that capsule for so long."

Shadow didn't know if that was the case, but the jolt of the elevator's movement knocked his wobbly legs enough that he dropped to the floor, still grasping the bar over his head. He started to count in his head, trying to keep his mind off of his circumstance.

One...two...three...four..five...six...seven...eight...nine...ten...elev-

The elevator suddenly jolted hard, and he heard Rouge get knocked down too as it came to a sharp stop in the shaft. He clung to the bar, listening as the hum of the elevator ended abruptly, followed by loud screeching and groans.

"What the hell!?"
Rouge got up, and he heard her pushing buttons repeatedly, giving irritated groans as she did so. "Ergh... Come on, come on!"

He opened one eye, finding the lights from before were out, leaving them in darkness, hovering somewhere between Point A and Point B.

He closed his eye again, "...*Told you* the elevator was out of-"

"Oh shut up."

Chapter 6: Fifty Feet Under

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been five minutes; Shadow knew this because he'd resumed his counting and reached sixty that many times before starting over.

He sat on the floor of the broken elevator, eyes closed and head leaned against the wall. Rouge had tried the buttons for a little while longer, but now it sounded like she'd also given up and was taking a seat across the small, enclosed space from him.

"...How long do you think it'll be before they come to investigate...?" Shadow whispered.

Rouge gave a soft grunt, and then there was a rustling as she reopened their bag of potato chips. "Not too long, I'd figure... They won't want to leave intruders unchecked."

"But you're one of *their* guys, right? So *you're* not an intruder."

"Well yeah, but they don't know that it's us *going in.*"

There was another period of silence, and Shadow tried to think of something other than being stuck here. He wished he had other memories, happier memories than the past day he'd been through. He could think back on those, something to comfort him and remind him of better days.

He thought about his and Rouge's previous conversation, and he had to admit, she did have a point. How *did* he know what Baton Rouge was? How *did* he know that the grass should be *green* due to *chlorophyll,* or that the sky was blue due to the *atmosphere?*

He seemed to know quite a bit about history, science... but he knew *nothing* about his *own* history. His personal experiences, the people he knew and what he did with them... That was all a distant cache he had yet to find.

Somebody must have taught him these things, and yet... They were lost to that abyss.

"...So... when they *do* come to investigate..." Shadow returned to their current conversation topic, "...Who do you think will be the ones to show up?"

"Eh... Probably the tech guy to get the elevator back into operation again... A few to restrain whoever they find sneaking in... not too many."

"How many are in the Guild?"

"I dunno... A lot, I think."

You think?
Shadow frowned, she didn't know? "...General guess?"

"Erm... Hundred... maybe? I don't see most of them, they're out on assignment and raids a lot, so I don't know exactly how many."

"The ones that you *do* see, what are their names?"

"They've got numbers, numbers that are assigned based on their rank in the group. They don't really have names... Why do you ask?"

"Oh, you know... Just trying to mentally prepare myself... Do *you* have a number?"

"Yeah, it's *six-hundred-something or other*. I can never remember, and they usually just call me Batgirl anyways."

"How long have you been with them?"

"...Ever since... since I was littler. They took me in when I was all alone."

"What happened to your family from before?"

The bat gave a growl deep in her throat. "*Not important.* Just *leave it* at that."

Shadow did, but all of this seemed odd. She'd only ever mentioned the Guild before as a collective, not any individual members, or any memories she had with any of them. they used numbers, not names, which seemed to be a way of distancing them from each other.
"*...Why...*?"

"Because I don't want to talk about it, that's why!"

"No, no. Not your old family... Why did the Guild take you in? It sounds like they only take in people that they think could be of some use to them... What did they think you could bring to the table?"

Rouge was silent again, and he heard her shifting in place on the floor... Was she not sure why, or was it a reason she wasn't comfortable sharing?

He didn't have much time to think it over, before the elevator shuddered again and he grasped tighter to the bar as it began to drop again with loud screeching and shaking back and forth. He heard Rouge yelp and was probably hanging on to the bar as well as they were rattled down the shaft.

Whatever the cause for them suddenly moving again, it had them falling faster than before. the system hadn't been fixed, but more like something in the lock system had snapped. Shadow dared open his eyes, seeing the lights were still out, but there was still light- his body was giving off those gold sparks again, flickering as he panicked and his heart raced.

All at once, the ride ended with a sharp jolt as the elevator hit what he presumed was the bottom of the shaft, and the hedgehog was grateful to have already been on the floor, or else he'd definitely have been knocked to it.

The flickering slowed, the groans and moans of settling metal echoed in their ears, and both hedgehog and bat sat still, taking in deep breaths and trying to calm themselves down.

"Well..." Rouge breathed, "...Here we are..."

Shadow gave a little huff, and then crawled through the darkness to the doors. He wiggled his fingers into the slot and then pulled hard, grunting as it screeched and then slowly the two sheets of metal were torn apart, and then he did the same with the second set of doors. They slid much more easily, and dim light poured into the space. Finally, Shadow could somewhat see around him, even if it was just a boring, empty hallway.

"Nice one, Quills." Rouge responded, climbing out in front of him and then offering them a hand and his stick.

Shadow accepted them, looking around their newest surroundings. More white walls, empty corridors, and dim, flickering lights. "...Sounds pretty quiet."

"I know... Odd."
Rouge looked around, her ears swiveling as if trying to listen for sounds of other thieves in the compound. She pulled her jacket tighter around herself, "...Come on, they're probably all down in the conference room."

'Maybe... I think... Probably...'
Shadow did not like how many words for *'Not completely confident in my answer'* he was getting from the bat all of a sudden... These humans were allies of hers, right? So it wouldn't be that unusual or wrong for him to just- *"HELLO!? ANYONE HERE!?"*

"Shh!" Rouge hissed, covering his mouth with her hand again, but this time fortunately minding his wounded leg and foot. "Not so loud! This is a *secret* base, we don't *yell* here."

Once again, Shadow pulled her hand back, "Rouge, we're *at least* seven stories down from the surface of the Earth. If each floor has ceilings this high- best guess about 8 feet- on top of supporting structure between floors, that puts us *at least* fifty feet underground. Nobody is going to hear us but your Guild buddies."

"Yeah, well... I don't think they're expecting me to come back with somebody."

Shadow's brows furrowed, "What do you mean? They sent you to collect me, didn't they?"

"Yes, but we didn't know you were *alive.*"

"...You expected me to be *dead?*" The hedgehog's eyes widened and he grabbed Rouge's arms tightly, "You agreed to steal a *corpse!?*"

"No no no!" Rouge pulled herself loose, rubbing her arms where he'd grasped them. "I was going into that base expecting to find a *battery,* or maybe the access codes to a weaponized satellite! I didn't know Project Shadow was a *living creature!*"

'Project Shadow.' Those two words together sent another ping into Shadow's head, another attempt to pull his memory back to the surface. But unlike before, this one lasted long enough

for him to get a look at something in them, or rather... *someone.*
It was a human, a man with a large mustache and dressed in a lab coat, looking down at him with a smile that somehow appeared both comforting and disconcerting, like the man had been trying to make Shadow feel better, but was only making him more nervous.

Shadow knew that he knew him from before... but who was he, and why did the words bring him to mind? Was he a part of it?

"Hey... Hey!"
Shadow jumped as Rouge grabbed his arms and jostled him a bit, shaking him out of the memory. "Earth to hedgehog. You still in there?"

"W-Wha...?" Shadow blinked, and then grimaced as he put a hand to his head. "Oh... Y-Yeah."

"Good, now come on. The conference room is this way."

Shadow was still, "...How about you go get them, and I'll just sit here and wait? I need to get off of my leg for a minute."

Rouge looked at him suspiciously, "How do I know you won't try to bolt?"

Shadow gestured to their surroundings. "Broken elevator, injured leg, fifty feet underground... There's not really anywhere for me to go."

"Hmm... Fine, but you'd better still be here when I get back, Quill Pickle!"

Shadow nodded, "I will."

He took a seat against the wall, watching her hurry down the hall and then giving him one last *'I've Got My Eyes On You'* motion to him before turning the corner and disappearing.

With her absence, he could focus his thoughts a bit more without her interrupting. He closed his eyes, trying to pull the man's face back into view. For better or worse, he wanted to remember...

... He needed to know how all of this started.

Another ping.

Agent Stone took another long slurp of his coffee, one hand on the wheel of his RV base of operations as it rumbled down the road. Cars honked and swerved to avoid him, the agent plowing through traffic like a combine harvester in a field.

He wasn't speeding, he knew better than to do that, but he wasn't about to let elderly commuters going fifteen miles under the limit prevent him from reaching his goal. He didn't outsize the cattle trucks going along, but he still outsized the typical commuter, and more than once already he had used the Queen's Sequence with his horn to clear the lane.

Did it confuse and irritate the heck out of the other drivers? Probably, but Stone didn't much care. He had a mission to complete, which meant he had right of way, right?

The ping ignited on the console dash, showing a location ahead of him and outside of town. Perfect. It appeared that Project Shadow had stopped to rest and there would be less onlookers for their first meeting.

Another ping from another screen told him that a military unit was headed for the same location.

Stone clenched his jaw and looked ahead at the road as the speed limit increased; he needed to get there first, he needed to have the plan in place and ready for when his Doctor returned...

Chapter End Notes

Here's another chapter for ya!

(Fun Fact: The "Queen's Sequence" mentioned is actually a series of horn bursts used by trains a lot in the area I live. It's *long-long-short-long* bursts of the horn, which translate in Morse Code to the letter 'Q', standing for 'Queen.' It was initially used by ships when they were carrying the Queen of England and were entering the harbor; they would blow this sequence to tell all of the other ships to get out of the way, because the Queen got the right of way. Trains use it in a similar manner, to signal *they* have right of way to cars crossing the tracks [for obvious reasons])

Chapter 7: All of This For...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A sound pulled Shadow out of sleep.

He hadn't intended on sleeping, just engaging in deep thought, but he supposed he knew better than to think that he wouldn't slump with how quiet it was down here and how tired he was.

His head snapped up from where it rested on his chest, his eyes flickering about in search of what made the sound. His ears swiveled back and forth, but whatever it was, it appeared to have gone. He was still at the end of the hall- the empty, all-too-quiet hall that he'd told Rouge he wouldn't leave while she went and found the rest of the Guild.

He'd fallen asleep waiting for her, but for how long? How long had it been?

His ears strained for her, trying to listen for footsteps, voices, anything... But all he heard was the irritating buzz of the fluorescent lights overhead. "...Rouge?" He called, vetoing her previous request for him to not raise his voice.

There was no answer.

Shadow frowned, wondering what to do next. He'd told her he'd stay here, but what if she'd run into trouble?
He waited another moment for a response, and then grunted as he pulled himself up onto his feet, leaning against his walking stick and limping down the corridor. "Rouge?" he called asked, "...If you can hear me, give me a sign."

Only the buzz responded, and it was getting to be both irritating... and oddly familiar. More flickers of recognition, as if wandering long, bland hallways was a common occurrence for him. He looked to his right as he approached the intersection he'd seen the bat go down, and his eyes widened as he saw a hall full of broken items.

Shattered picture frames, chairs with deep claw marks dug into the leather, potted plants spilled and tipped over. Something had been through here, and no doubt the sound of the destruction was what had woken him. Doors were smashed from their hinges, and at the end of the hall, he saw a shape on the floor. "R-Rouge...!"

Shadow limped around and over the destroyed objects, walking into the room. With the large table and multiple tipped-over chairs, he could only guess this was the Conference Room she'd mentioned going to look for. Rouge sat on the floor, her back to him and her wings drooping across the carpet. Claw marks were also in her jacket, splitting it into slashes on her arms.

"Rouge... You okay...?" He asked. The bat didn't answer, didn't even twitch. He hobbled closer, slowly moving around to look her in the face. Her eyes were wide and bloodshot, staring blankly at the floor, tear streaks running down her cheeks, and her mouth was open, but she made no sound.

"Rouge...?"
Shadow got down onto his hands and knees again, wincing as his leg throbbed again. He reached a hand out towards the bat, "Hey... Can you *hear me*...?"

Rouge blinked, but otherwise, she didn't move. It was like she was in some sort of trance, trapped in place and unaware of anything around her. Her breathing was slow, barely felt as Shadow held a hand in front of her nose, and then Shadow saw faint, green wisps flickering around her ears.

She was in a state of shock. Shadow didn't know how he knew that, but he did, and he needed to find a way to snap her out of it. He had to find out what caused this... The quiet, the absence of the other members of the Guild, the broken elevator... It confirmed something Shadow had already guessed- The base was abandoned, so that meant the two of them were the only ones here.

Abandoned... *Rouge* had been abandoned.

"Rouge..."
Shadow reached down and took the bat's hands in his own- they felt so cold compared to his- and leaned closer to her. "Hey... You're not alone... You're not all by yourself, I... I'm still here. Okay? I'm still here."

Shadow rubbed the tops of her hands with his thumbs, squeezing them just a little in the process.

I'm not going anywhere...
The girl's voice whispered in his head, the same girl from the Hall of Mirrors. His vision flickered, and he saw her doing the same thing to his hands that he was doing to Rouge's.
Don't be afraid... I'm not going anywhere...

He swallowed hard as a sadness hit him, a sadness he wasn't certain where it was coming from. He looked back to Rouge as the memory faded out again, whispering the words to her aloud. "I'm not going anywhere... Don't be afraid..."

Rouge still didn't respond, but her shoulders slumped a bit more, the wisps faded out, and then Shadow grunted as she fell forward into his chest, her head resting on his shoulder as he caught her. "E-Easy, easy... I've got you now...!" He whispered, putting a hand to her back. "...It's going to be okay."

"Why... Why am... I... I not..."
Rouge's voice was a soft, muffled whisper, but it was something.

"I don't know what you're asking... But I promise, it'll be okay..."

"N-Not... Not norm...normal... Why... wasn't I... born... Why *was... Was* I born...?"

"Okay, that's going a bit far, don't you think?"

Shadow's ears then pricked as he heard a click from somewhere in the room. He couldn't see it, but he did hear a soft voice- robotic and emotionless- speak.

15 seconds to detonation remaining.

"Oh no... No no no-"
Shadow shook the bat a little, but she was still out of it. "O-Okay, sorry Rouge. But I gotta!"

He reached past her, his fingers slipping into her pocket and wrapping around the stone. It immediately grew warm and bright in his hand, "Green Hills, Green Hills, Green Hills!" He cried, hoping that he could find out what he did before, before he ran out of-

A sudden rush of energy washed over him, and he held tightly to Rouge with his other arm as the heat burned through his body, and then in a flicker, they disappeared from the room. He free-fell through the bright light, clinging tightly to the bat, until all at once, it was gone, and he gave a grunt as he crashed into the grass.

He laid still in the cool for a few moments, and then a loud boom pricked his ear, and he sat up quickly.

Off in the distance, he could see the city where they'd been, the lights breaking up the darkness; but what broke the darkness the most was the massive fireball erupting from a nearby structure... The base going up in flames and smoke, hiding any sign of the Guild's presence.

Shadow gave a sigh of relief, they were safe- Well, safe from being blown up, at least. They were out in the middle of nowhere with no roof over their heads anymore, but at least they weren't buried fifty feet down under floors upon floors of rubble and no hope of rescue.

He relaxed a little, but then he heard a whimper, and he turned to face Rouge, who still laid in the grass and was trembling. "H-Hey, it's okay. You're safe now-"

"Safe...!"
Rouge's eyes blazed as she seethed, "They left me... Again...! I...I don't... I don't matter to *anyone!*"

"Hey, hey."
Shadow plopped down behind her as she sobbed, "Listen to me. You matter. I'd still be in that capsule if not for you... Those Guild guys don't know what a good thief and infiltrator they had. You matter..."

"Y-You're going to leave me *too...!* Our agreement doesn't matter without them!"

"Well, then..." Shadow sighed, "...We make a *new* agreement... I'll be your company if you'll be mine... How does that sound?"

Rouge still cried, but Shadow reached out and grasped her hand again. "...I'm not going anywhere... You're not alone..."

They were both all alone... but they were all alone *together*.

It was a few more minutes before Rouge calmed enough to stop shaking, and Shadow was wondering if she was falling asleep, before she rolled over to face him. "...What do we do? Where do we go from here?"

Shadow looked out towards the wilderness; that was a good question. As he peered, a distant glow- green in color- appeared on the horizon, like the Aurora Borealis. He nodded, and then grabbed his walking stick. "...We head for that light on the horizon."

Rouge got up, looking ahead where he pointed. "I...I don't see it."

"Really...?" Shadow rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn't imagining it, but it was still there. "...Well then, I guess I'll do the looking and leading from now on... This time, I'm taking you somewhere."

Rouge sniffled, her wings and ears still drooping as she took his hand. "Okay..."

"Good... Let's go, before somebody comes looking for the cause of that explosion."

Rouge wished she was okay, that she was fine.

She heard Shadow's voice, but it seemed so distant... so quiet. She couldn't make out what he was saying, and though she felt his hand touch hers, it felt numb.

They left her... She was left alone again. Why? Why did this keep happening...?

She told Shadow to stay put and then headed for the hall- only to find the shattered remains of pots, and the broken frames. The path led her to the conference room, empty and the chairs tipped on their sides.

Nobody was here, nobody but her... She was all alone again... Just like when she was a child.

"Mama...? Mama, where are you?"
Her own little voice rang in her memory, her little bare feet feeling the cold, empty ground of a cold, empty cave.

...And now her new family was also gone... or at least, she'd *thought* they were her new family.

"Why did the Guild take you in? It sounds like they only take in people that they think could be of some use to them... What did they think you could bring to the table?"
Shadow's questions had been pounding in her skull ever since he asked them, and now... now she wasn't sure. What had they really thought she could provide to them? An infiltrator? A thief?

A scapegoat.

The bat was trapped in her past, caught in a cell of memories and a downward spiral of thoughts that she couldn't escape, not even when she heard Shadow outside of it.

Then... then the words began to come to her ears.

"What if she doesn't find anything and gets herself caught?"

"What if she does find it and brings it here? Boss, you gotta think of something!"

"...Load up the vans with what we can carry and set the charges. Nobody finds anything after we're gone, understood?"

Her skill, her power, the power to hear what was said before... It was just another curse laid on her at birth, another curse, another difference.

She'd been stuck in that spiral and trap until they hit the ground outside, but that jolt through her system only knocked her emotional reactions loose from their jammed state.

She cried, she cried harder than she had in her own memory. She should have known it was too good to be true, she should have known it wasn't a real family she'd found. She was used by them as much as they would have used Shadow.

Shadow helped her to her feet, and they started to walk. Walking forwards into the dark, towards a light only he seemed capable of seeing. He was an odd little hedgehog, but... he hadn't left her yet. Why? What did he want from her? What did she have to offer him now...?

She guessed... She'd have to wait and see...

Chapter End Notes

Well, guess it's time for Shadow's plan now...

Chapter 8: Travel Passes

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"That was quick..." Agent Tower whispered under his breath as he stepped into the room.

It had only been hours since he and the rest of the team sent to Green Hills had given their report, and Agent Tower had shared his opinion of how his commanding officer was handling things. It had been a serious risk to do so, even if Commander Walters hadn't been in the room, but he hadn't expected them to make a decision so quickly.

Government decisions like this tended to take *days,* if not *weeks* to be made, so why was this suddenly taking priority?

What had happened in those few hours?

He stepped before the council, giving a salute. "Sirs."

"Agent Tower... A few hours ago, we received word that a large abandoned structure outside of Rapid City, South Dakota was destroyed by a significant explosion."

Agent Tower remained quiet as he nodded, waiting to see if they'd tell him how this was important to anything previously discussed.

"At the same time, we received a ping of Project Shadow's energy signature in the same area. We have reason to believe that it was responsible."

Reason, but no proof. Tower thought silently. *You think he did it, but still, what does this have to do with me? I wasn't assigned to that case-*

"And it wasn't working *alone.*"

Aaaaand there it was.

"Our agents managed to locate *two* distinct energy signatures in the building prior to the explosion. We believe the project is working with a being from the same energy signatures as the aliens presently... *residing* in Green Hills."

"What is your plan going forward?"

"Precisely why you're here, Agent. We have debated your words from earlier, and find it to be a sound argument. We need more information, especially if one of them is secretly working with Project Shadow. You are hereby assigned to a long-term station in Green Hills. You head out at six-hundred hours Tuesday. Understood?"

"Understood. Thank you, I will do my best to monitor the situation with utmost precision."

"Good man... Dismissed to collect your things."

"Thank you."
Agent Tower saluted again and then left the room calmly, but inside, he was both slumping with relief and brimming with anticipation. He was going to get a lot more done with this assignment, he could only hope it was enough to get the answers he craved...

...He just had to hope that Shadow could keep himself safe and out of trouble until the truth was uncovered.

"...I'm tired."

"We've been walking all night, so I'm not surprised. Thank you for keeping that comment to yourself until now."

Walking all night hadn't initially been the plan, but then again, neither had the Guild's abandoned hideout blowing to the moon and sending the authorities out to the area- along with others. Local snoops, fire department, and Rouge had a feeling that the black helicopters she saw approaching had been government ones.

They'd started to walk out into the fields and open rural areas, the wind whipping cold around them as the sun vanished and night overtook the skies. They thought of stopping a few times, but nowhere seemed to be quite safe enough for them both to relax and get some shut-eye, so they trudged on.

Those potato chips that weedhead had given Shadow hadn't lasted them long, and so now they were hungry as well.

Now, the sun was coming around on the other side of the world, tinting the horizon a lighter blue against looming clouds on the horizon.

Rouge yawned, "Still seeing that green glow?"

Shadow nodded; for someone who had a wounded leg, he'd been keeping up a steady pace along the way. He seemed quite intent on following that trail to its end, and so Rouge followed.

"Any idea what it is?"

Shadow shook his head, "Just... Something familiar... I feel like I've seen something similar to it before, though... green light hovering over the ground... bands of color..."

"The Northern Lights, maybe?"

"Hmm?"

"The Northern Lights, or Aurora Borealis. It's what happens when solar energy interacts with the planet's gravitational pull, it makes a visible reaction in the sky... Not really seen this far

south, though."

"Hmm... Then where would I have seen it...?"

Rouge had an idea, but she wasn't sure how much to share. She knew only so much about Shadow and his past before being in that capsule, but she worried. If she told him that she knew something, would what little she had be enough, or would he try to press her for more information? Even if she wanted to give him all of the answers, she had no idea how or where to find more.

"I'm sure it'll come back to you at some point." She assured, and then stopped. "Hey... Do you hear that?"

Shadow paused, his own ears swiveling to listen. "...What is it?"

Rouge's ears moved around, trying to find the source of the sound she'd heard... there it was again... a humming and clacking of metal. "...Trains!"

"A train? What's so cool about that?"

Rouge looked to him, "We can ride the trains some of the way! That'll let us rest and we can still make good time!"

"Are you sure that's *safe?*"

"*'Safe'* went out the window a long time ago, Quills. Come on, it's still dark enough that we can slip onto one without being seen."

"O-Okay!" Shadow stammered as she tugged him towards the sound. "If you're *sure* about this..."

The bat and hedgehog made their way towards the sound, and Rouge grinned as she saw the rail yard ahead of them. "Perfect! Now you wait here-"

"What? Why?"

"I gotta figure out which trains are headed in that direction, or else we might just hitch a ride right back to where we started. I'll be right back."

Shadow tilted his head, "You... Trust me not to run away?"

"You promised, didn't you?"

The hedgehog nodded, "Right. I promised, and I keep my promises."

"Good. Now sit tight and stay outta sight. I'll be right back!"

Rouge took off into the air, leaving the hedgehog alone to mumble things to himself.

Time to put my spying skills to good use...

"Sit tight, sit tight... is sitting *loose* a thing too...?"

Shadow slumped in the grass, trying to keep as low to the ground as he could to avoid being seen or heard by any nearby humans. The darkness combined with his dark coloring certainly helped with stealth, but the sun would be rising soon, and then that black fur of his would make him as visible as a spotlight on an empty stage.

He watched the white bat take off and glide over the train yard below, not even making a sound before landing on top of the roof of a building. Lights shone all over the yard, but not above the rooftops, allowing her to creep over the top of the roof and then disappear onto the other side without any detection.

"If she's smart enough to break into a government facility and back out with a hostage, I guess she can get a copy of the train schedule..." he mumbled. He looked out towards the green glow once more, what was out there? What was making that glow, and why did he feel so inclined to head towards it?

Green Hill... Well, it was certainly green.

A few minutes later, Rouge appeared on the rooftop, and then quickly flapped up to the top of the hill again, holding a piece of paper in one hand. "Okay, so we need to get on train B-223, which is... That one."

She pointed to one of the trains in the yard, which fortunately was one of the closer ones. "It's supposed to be heading out in about five minutes, so we need to hurry-"

"Don't you think they'll *need* that paper for *other* things?"

"Hmm? Oh no, this is a *copy* I made while I was in there."

"You..." Shadow shook his head, "You know what? Fine. Sure. Let's catch that train."

"Great, but if we're gonna sneak aboard..." Rouge held her arms out, and Shadow groaned.

"Alright, fine." He held his arms out, "But just until we're on the train, alright?"

"Whatever you say."

Shadow blushed a bit as she scooped him up into her arms, "You are very *strong,* you know."

"And *you* are very *heavy.* Let's go."

Shadow frowned, but kept from making a sound as Rouge took off into the air again. Humans milled about the yard all over, but Rouge was able to glide up and over them before swooping into one of the cars. She gasped as the metal thumped under her feet, and quickly carried Shadow behind some stacks of cargo.

"What was that?"
Neither of them made a sound, or ever dared to breathe as the humans searched the car.
"...Eh, probably just the lumber settling. Let's go!"

The car's door rumbled shut and locked, and Rouge relaxed, plopping down on the floor with a sigh of relief. "That was too close..."

"But we're on our way soon, right?"

"Right... And we didn't even have to pay for a ticket... If I get splinters from this wood though, I'm blaming you-"

"This was *your* idea in the first place-!"

Chapter End Notes

Guess who got distracted by other projects and hasn't updated this one in seven months?

Sorry, guys-

Chapter 9: Confusion and Delay

Project Shadow was much more devastating than Agent Stone had initially thought, and not very good at staying hidden, if the massive fireball had been anything to go by.

Pedal to the metal, the man had broken free of traffic and rushed in the direction of his quarry's last known location. He would beat out the government pests, the news snoops, everyone, and get what he longed for.

If his research into the creature was accurate, Project Shadow almost belonged to him anyways. As the assistant to the grandson of the man who created the creature, he was sort of next-of-kin! He would keep the creature safe and on their side until the Doctor returned... and he *would return.*

That was Agent Stone's plan... up until he was within sight of the large building the signal was coming from... and watched it explode upwards. It was a flash of white light that filled the sky, and Agent Stone slammed on the brakes, coming to a stop just in time for the sound to follow the light in its path. The RV rocked, the windshield cracked in the top-right corner, and whole small trees were splintered from their roots.

"...*Damn*...!" The man whispered with wide eyes, and then checked his scanners again. Dammit, the blast had knocked them out of sync. Between the smoke rising up into the skies and raining bits of debris beginning to come back down like a meteor shower, Stone couldn't make out the creature as it potentially left the scene.

He couldn't get closer, and by the time the scanners were back online, his quarry would probably be long gone again.

The man slammed his fist on the screen, and then it chirped again. Another ping, on the move away from the road. The military lackeys would be busy dealing with the destructive fallout for the moment, which gave him some time...

And several hours later, he'd followed the trail across the hills and rivers to an old train yard. The ping, weak as it may be for the moment, was hovering somewhere amongst the rows of iron boxes and wheels. Somewhere in there, was what he'd been following and aiming for.

The problem was that these trails of metal could become mobile, and in his search Project Shadow might hop on one and ride away again. He needed to keep them all stationary... he needed a plan.

He tapped a button on the RV's dash, "Steamed austrian goat's milk with shiitake mushrooms on the side."

Passcode accepted... Initiating activation protocols...

"Time to use that tech the Doctor permitted me to use..."

"It's been longer than five minutes, Rouge..."

"Shh... It's fine. Trains can be a few minutes late."

"What if you picked the wrong one?"

"I didn't, I checked the paper."

"What if the *paper* was wrong?"

"Shadow, just chill, would you? We'll be getting out of here soon...!"

"I *can't* chill. Something's wrong out there, I can feel it..." Shadow scrubbed his face with his hands, "...Someone is out there looking for me."

"Lots of people are out there looking for you, Shadow. The government is a lot of people-"

"No, I mean..." He peered out from behind his fingers, "...Out there... in the train yard... weird vibe, man...! Not to mention my claustrophobia is starting to try to pick up again."

"Okay, well... try some breathing exercises."

"I have been. I've counted to sixty... eight times now. Three minutes late."

Rouge sighed, leaning back against the wall. If this was going to be happening the entire ride, it was going to be a very long ride. "Try to think of something else... Something happy."

Shadow was quiet for a moment, as if thinking. "...Like what?"

"I dunno, something that's happened to you that made you happy."

"Well, considering everything in my memory has been this trip pretty much, I don't have a lot of *'happy'* to remember."

"Right... Oops."

The hedgehog groaned as he leaned back against the wall as well. "Ugh... I wish my memory wasn't so messed up. No good memories to think back on, no other memories to use as reference for why I am the way I am... I can't even remember what I did to *injure my leg!"*

"Well, that's no surprise." Rouge expressed, "The number of times I've found a healing bruise and not remembered how I got it-"

"A bruise and a bum leg aren't exactly the same thing, Rouge..." Shadow leaned back against the wall of the train car, "... The information my memory retained is all... *general.*"

"What do you mean?"

"Grass being green from chlorophyll, the sky being blue due to particles in the atmosphere, that's all stuff *anybody* could know, right? But what's missing isn't that sort of stuff, it's *personal* stuff... Who I am, where I come from..." He put his hands to his head, "...Why can't I remember... *me?*"

"Would it help if I told you what I know about you?"

Shadow looked to her with a slight smirk, "How much trouble could *that* cause...? Sure."

"Well... Let me think." Rouge scooched over to beside him, "... Here's what the Guild knew about you- or at least... what they told me... Project Shadow was a project conducted aboard a space station, back in the nineteen-seventies... The place was called Space Colony Ark-"

The next words Rouge spoke weren't heard by the hedgehog, he wasn't there on the train anymore, he was... somewhere else. A vision...

...He was in a bland hallway, with gray walls and simple flooring... Everything was tinted in red, sirens blared overhead, hurting his ears... His hand was being held by someone... A girl was tugging him along behind her... The girl from before, the girl in the mirror.

'Y-Your heart-!' He heard his voice gasping as they ran.

'Don't worry about me, Shadow.' The girl responded,' *I'm fine... We'll be fine...!'*

She *wasn't* fine, Shadow knew that... but what was wrong? What was going on? Why were they running, and from what-

"Shadow, snap out of it!"

Shadow gasped as the scene vanished, replaced by... metal ceilings? He was moving, the ground shuddering underneath him... Where was he?

"Shadow, come on, talk to me!"

Arms were gripping his shoulders, and he looked forward to find another person with him. A female, he guessed, but not the girl, with fur like him. "W-Who are you!? Where am I!?" He whimpered, his heart racing in his chest.

The creature's face shifted to concern, her voice lowering. "Hey, it's *me.* It's Rouge. Remember? I got you out?"

Shadow blinked, Rouge... *Rouge.* She'd... saved him from the... the capsule... right. "...Rouge. S-Sorry..." He covered his face with his hands, "I-I'm sorry, I...I don't know what happened, I-"

"Hey, it's okay. You're clearly going through some things..." She looked around, and Shadow remembered they were in a train car... one that was finally moving out on its way. "Geez, your memory really *is* screwed up. Your long-term's shot, and the short-term-"

"Faulty at best...!" Shadow hissed, fighting back the tears welling in his eyes. "I'm not right in the head-"

"That's not true. You just... need a little more time to recover, right? A-And I'll help you, okay?"

Shadow lifted his head, "...Why?"

"Well, you're the only one who can see that green aura, after all. *Somebody's* gotta lead the way."

Shadow sighed, putting his head back down into his hands. "...Tell me more about what you know."

"And have you go into a trance again?"

"*Please...!* You were at... at the Ark."

"...Okay... So you were *created* on board the Space Colony, but you were locked up after... something happened. The entire facility was decommissioned, but there wasn't really any explanation of *why* that we could find."

"What happened to the people on board? The scientists and staff?"

"Erm... Not sure. I would guess most of them got transferred to other facilities. The other projects were locked up too, I guess."

Shadow lifted his head a bit, "Other projects? Like me?"

"Erm... I don't think so, but... to be honest, the info we had on you didn't say anything about you being a sentient being, just a really powerful thing that was made."

Shadow opened his fingers to peer out from between them, "Powerful... Don't really *feel* that way. More like-"

"Pathetic?"

The hedgehog's ears folded back with a grumble.

"Eh, don't get your quills in a bunch. I'm only teasing."

"Yeah, well it still hurt... because you're *right.*"

Rouge put a hand to his shoulder, "We'll figure it out... Now, would you like to play a game to pass the time?"

He pulled his hands down to look at her once more, "...What kind of game?"

"A thinking game! I'll start, I'm thinking of something... round and orange."

"An orange."

"Great! Your turn!"

"Okay... I'm thinking of something... *green.*"

"Animal or vegetable?"

"Animal."

"Ooh, tough one. Okay, lemme think-"

They both paused as they heard the loud screech of brakes and the train began to pull to a stop. "Hmm?"

Shadow peeked out towards the door, still shut up tight. "Why are we stopping again?"

"Probably just waiting for the light to turn green saying we can go through..." Rouge whispered, but her tone seemed suspicious as well.

Shadow ducked even lower behind the wood stacks, folding up tightly into a ball but keeping his one leg straight- bending it only brought more pain. "What if they noticed us...?"

"If they'd noticed us, then we wouldn't have started moving in the first place. Just be patient..."

Patience was hard to have when you were illegally riding a train across the country and were trying to hide from every sentient being in sight...

"So let me make sure I've got this straight...You're an agent of the government."

"Yes."

"And some government property has been stolen, and you think it's been stashed on one of the trains here in the yard."

"Yes. So I need all of them to remain stationary until we can search them all."

The yard foreman blinked, overlooking the papers this man had handed him. His tone seemed sincere, but something about the paperwork seemed screwy... Perhaps it was the paper was too crisp, the printing too recent, or perhaps it was that this *supposed agent* of the United States Government had rolled up in an old RV that looked like it had seen better days a few *decades* ago.

Something about this was definitely screwy.

"Can I have a *description* of this stolen property?"

It seemed like a logical request. If they were going to be going through every car and every train in the yard, that was going to not be hours of work, but also hours of delays down the

line. They couldn't be wasting time checking every metal container they found, especially when they didn't know what exactly was stolen.

The agent didn't speak, in fact, he seemed taken by surprise by the question. If he was from their government, did *he* even know what he was looking for?

"I mean, is it a box, or a bag, or a long pole... *something.* Gimme some context here. I have a business to run, and if we're gonna convince your superiors that the rail is still needed for import and export-"

A train whistle blew loudly, and both of them looked to see one of the trains leaving the yard.

"What the- I thought you told them all-"

"Not yet, I hadn't. Not until I'm *convinced.* Besides, that's Martin, and he's got a *retirement party* waiting for him on the other end of the line." The foreman smirked, "He's not worried about getting fired. He's not stopping..."

"W-We're moving again."

"See? Told ya to just be patient. Now, go to sleep. We've still got some time before we have to get off."

Shadow crossed his arms and leaned his head back against the vibrating wall of the train car. He hadn't slept all night, and even then it had only been a short amount of time back at the Guild's old base. He closed his eyes, hoping to be able to get some good, restful sleep amidst all of this...

...Something told him he wouldn't be getting much of it for a while.

Chapter 10: Meet and Greet with Snow and Stone

"Shadow...? Shadow..."

Shadow's ears twitched at the voice hissing in his ear, and he gave a groan, trying to turn away from it. "Not now..." He whispered.

"Shadow, we have to get off the train now, before the humans see us."

Shadow's eyes opened and he groaned again, rubbing them with his hands. That sleep was definitely not enough. "Ugh...Alright, alright... gimme a second..."

The consistent vibration and rumbling of the train on tracks was slowing, a the soft creaks and screeches of metal brakes on metal rails reaching his ears as he yawned and felt through the darkness for his walking stick.

Pat, pat, pat... pat pat- "Rouge-"

"Got it here."

Shadow felt the stick be pressed into his palms, and he gripped it tightly as he used it to shove himself up onto his feet. Rest had done nothing to dull the pain, instead adding a stiffness to his bum leg as he limped towards the door. Even from inside the massive container, Shadow could feel the chill from outside. The temperature had dropped somewhere along the way, and as Rouge was able to pull the door away and reveal the outside, Shadow's eyes were blinded by the sudden change from dark to white. "Ah...!"

"Ah great...!" Rouge muttered, "Snow."

Shadow's eyes took a moment to adjust, and then when he looked back, he found them passing through a world covered in a white powder. It dusted the trees, rocks, and grass in a blanket, glistening under the morning sunlight. "What?"

"Snow. Frozen water."

"Isn't that *ice?"*

"Yeah, but that's different."

Shadow was quite confused, but he didn't try to get more information on the substance before him, other than a very important question. "...How hurt are we going to get jumping into it?"

Rouge smirked, "Not much. Come on, the train's gonna hit civilization soon, so we gotta go now."

Shadow swallowed, looking out into the land moving past them. "Okay... Ladies first."

"Oh sure... Hold on, scaredy-hog!"

"Hey wait! Roo-Aaah!"
The bat had clothes-lined him and knocked him from the train car with one quick motion, and they free-fell for only a moment before landing in the white powder. To his relief, this snow was not as hard as he'd expected, instead collapsing underneath them just enough to cushion the fall. It was cold, however, and Shadow quickly sat up and shook his quills clear of it. "Ugh... What were you trying to do, Rouge!?"

"Worked, didn't it?"
Rouge popped up from the snow, her fur almost blending in with it as she too shook it from her fur and then tugged her hood on over her ears. "Ugh... Snow, cold, gross... Come on."

Shadow rolled his eyes, "I hope you've got yourself a plan."

"What do you see?"

Shadow looked around the area, trying to focus on the details. The train tracks off to the side were cleared of snow, but everything was covered in a sheet of white. But, there was a haze over all of it as well... a green haze. Was this it? Was this the elusive *'Green Hills'* he'd been told about?

No, they weren't quite there yet, because he saw that further into the woods, the haze grew more intense in its concentration, and then rose up towards the heavens, where he could make out sheer cliffs that it spilled over like milk off the end of the table... Don't ask him why *that* was the analogy his brain came up with. Whatever they were headed for, it was close, but not yet in their grasp. He pointed into the trees, "That way... it's spilling out from above those peaks."

Rouge looked up at the cliff faces ahead of them, and sighed. "That's a long climb for you, Quill Pickle... And a long flight for me if I try to carry you... I dunno."

Shadow sighed, brows furrowing. "I know... but something's up there... Calling for me... You got any other ideas?"

"Excuse me,"
The two whipped around, and their eyes widened as they saw a human man standing a few yards from them, hands folded behind his back. "I might be of some assistance."

"Who are you?" Shadow asked.

Rouge crouched down beside him, "Trouble, no doubt."

"Now now, don't be like that." The man offered a gloved hand out towards them, "I'm looking for something, and I have a feeling you might be able to help."

Shadow tilted his head, "What are you looking for, exactly?"

"A project that was under the guidance of my employer's grandfather... Project Shadow. I was asked to make sure it made it to safety."

Shadow's ears pricked, and he looked to Rouge. She was glaring at the man, slowly making her way behind him. She didn't seem to trust him, but he wasn't running away, or screaming, or trying to hurt them. "...He might be able to help us get over the cliffs..." He breathed.

"Don't like it." Rouge hissed, "...Seems too... *chummy.*"

"Didn't you try the same thing when we first got started? And *you* turned out to be okay."

"That's *different...!*" Rouge crouched closer to him, her eyes never leaving the man. "...Promise you won't hurt him?"

"Him?"

Shadow gripped his walking stick, and grunted as he pulled himself up onto his feet. "...*I* am Project Shadow... or, so they all *tell me.*"

The man's expression changed just a hint, but Shadow wasn't quite sure what it meant. The smile never waned, however, and he offered a hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Project Shadow. I am Stone."

"It's... Just *Shadow*..." Shadow took a step forward, "Your employer's grandfather was the head of the project?"

"Indeed."

"So you might be able to tell me where I came from, then. I've lost a lot of memory of that time, you see. Anything you could provide would be appreciated. It's hard not knowing who I am, or what I'm supposed to do."

Stone bent down a little lower and closer to Shadow's level, "Well, don't worry, I'm sure we can help you find your purpose."

"How did you find us?" Rouge asked sharply.

"Quite simple, really. Shadow here has been giving off a rather *traceable* energy signal as you've traveled... I've no doubt that the government agents will be here soon following the same trail, so we need to move out quickly."

Shadow nodded, taking Rouge's hand. "Where I go, she comes with me."

Rouge frowned, "Shadow-"

"I promised not to leave you..."

The bat grumbled, and he gave a light smile as he felt her grip tighten on his hand just a bit. "...Do I get to hit you if I'm right about this?"

"...Sure."

"Fine... So long as we can get out of this cold misery."

"It was your idea to jump out of the train..." Shadow mumbled, and then looked back to the man. "Alright, Mr. Stone... Lead the way."

"Excellent..."

This... wasn't what Agent Stone had expected.

He was praising himself a bit for having made the right call- the one train that was heading out from the yard without consequence had been the one to house Project Shadow and its escape. Following it had been the tricky part, but no lack of Robotnik's drones had prevailed to yield success. The energy practically bleeding from the missing project had left a trail easy to follow, and he had arrived just in time to collect it as it jumped ship in the woods... but what he found was not what he'd anticipated.

To be fair, the notes on Project Shadow's appearance and physical description had been few and far between, mostly on its power and capabilities. What a list that was, too! But when he'd crossed over the ridge, the last thing he'd expected- or even hoped- to see were *more fluffy aliens.* Not to mention, so close to Green Hills? It was fortune that they hadn't walked right into those ridiculous Wachowskis' backyard and been accepted in their fold *on sight.*

Another hedgehog, black as night with streaks of blood red breaking it apart, accompanied by a *girl bat*- the first of *both* of those he'd seen. They must've had the project in hand... and then the hedgehog announced that *he* was Project Shadow?

But the scans confirmed it. This hedgehog was the source of the immense power surges and bleeding trail, and Agent Stone needed to secure him. Quickly. He seemed quite trusting of Stone, but if what he had told Stone was true, he might very well be desperate. His memory was mixed up- no doubt a result of something done to him by the government prior to his sealing in stasis for fifty years- and he sounded like he was anxious to try and get some of those memories back...

...Perfect. Stone could feed him just about anything and it would serve to turn him to their side. The bat, however... She was going to be a problem.

The plan was far simpler when Stone hadn't known that his quarry was alive and able to make friends. He could have taken the two of them out and then been on his way, but now, he needed to keep Shadow to his side, which unfortunately meant bringing the bat along. A bat who didn't trust Stone one bit, but *Shadow* trusted *her.* From what the man could gather, it was Rouge that had been the one to steal Shadow away from the laboratory, under the request of some thieves guild that apparently had decided to make it a suicide mission and abandoned her in her absence. So now, Rouge was traveling with Shadow, the two of them having been trying to follow some trail only Shadow could see.

Interesting... but still a problem. He needed Shadow for his plan, but not Rouge. How could he have one and not the other...? He'd need to get them apart.

He also noticed that Shadow was *limping*- an injury from falling off of the train a short time ago? He would need to look into that later. For now, he needed to get them where they were safe... and secure. Solving the *'new friend'* problem could come later...

Chapter 11: Just a Small Favor...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"I don't really trust him *either,* Rouge..."

Well, that certainly made the bat feel a *bit* better. He wasn't a complete idiot, he could still read a room, but his desperation to get answers about himself and his past was what was driving him onward right now. Rouge supposed she couldn't blame him for that.

If *she'd* woken up in a mysterious capsule, locked away for reasons she couldn't remember or explain, she supposed she'd be eager to get context *too.*

Stone was guiding them along through the snow, and Rouge held tightly to Shadow's arm to keep him from stumbling. The drifts were deep, and though the trees and cliffs kept the wind from gusting by them, it was still bitterly cold. How was this man wandering through it in just a business suit and gloves?

She didn't like this, not one bit.

The RV he led them to looked old and rickety as all get-out, but when they stepped inside, it appeared to be only for show, because the interior was decked out with scanners, screens and all sorts of buttons that did who-knows-what.

The Guild would've sold some of their own into *slavery* to get their hands on this kind of tech.

"Wow..." Shadow whispered, looking as Stone closed the door behind them. It was much warmer in here, and some of that might've been just from all the enclosed machinery. "So... your boss is related to my creator, you said?"

"Correct. The doctor is the grandson of Professor Gerald Robotnik, the one in charge of Project Shadow's development... *Your* development."

"Gerald Robotnik..." Shadow hummed, "...Yes... That does sound vaguely familiar."

"Your memory loss is unfortunate, but expected, having been sealed in stasis for so long no doubt had an effect on your psyche. But perhaps it will return with a little prompting... What *do* you remember?"

"Erm... Not much, I'm afraid... Flashes of images, places... but there was... I think there was a girl."

"Hmm... Yes, it appears that the Doctor had a cousin, Maria. She was present at the lab as well."

"Maria..."
Shadow's eyes widened a bit, and for a second, Rouge was worried he'd gone into another trance, but then he turned back to the man. "Glad I have a name to go with the face. Do the records you have tell what happened? *Why* I was placed in that capsule?"

Stone sighed, "Alas, it is not a tale with a happy ending..."
He gestured to one of the seats up front of the RV, and Shadow sat down, and Rouge settled directly behind him. If there was any funny business, she wanted to be ready to bolt with him if necessary.
"Project Shadow started out as a project to find and cure a disease that Maria was inflicted with, and perhaps even more. The Ultimate Lifeform, this project was supposed to be able to have a genetic coding that could then be used to cure cancer, NIDS, diabetes, everything a human could be afflicted with, and even extend their lifespans."

"Sounds awfully *ambitious*..." Shadow murmured, "And... that project led to me being created?"

"Correct. Unfortunately, the government that was funding the project decided that you could be used more efficiently as a weapon for their own ends, rather than a project for healing... Professor Robotnik refused to release you to them, so they attacked the colony to take you by force... The professor, Maria, and several others on board were killed in that attack, and then you were taken by the government and locked away."

"But why? If they wanted me for a weapon, why put me in storage?"

"I don't know. Perhaps you refused to help them after what happened." Stone stood up a little bit straighter, "However, *Doctor* Robotnik and I have been working on a plan, a plan to make this world better for everyone so that things like that will never happen again."

"*Also* quite an ambitious goal, Stone."

Stone grinned, "The Robotniks are an ambitious lineage, obviously."

"Where is Doctor Robotnik *now?*" Rouge asked.

"The Doctor is presently unavailable. He is off on a sabbatical, planning out our next step before returning. I have no doubt we will hear from him soon, and until then, I am continuing to collect the tools we will need to accomplish our mission."

"So... Where do *I* come in?"

"You are a part of the Robotnik legacy, and thus it seemed heartless to leave you sealed away for the rest of eternity. I sought to free you, but it appears that your bat friend was one step ahead of me... Very well. That being said, I *do* have a *favor* to ask of you, Shadow."

"A favor?"

"Yes... Not too far from here is a town, on the outskirts of which the Doctor has stored away a tool of our uses for safe-keeping. I would like for you to retrieve it for me, and we'll be one

step closer to being ready."

"A tool, you say...?" Shadow squirmed a bit in the chair, "I suppose I can *try*... what would I be looking for?"

"It is called the Master Emerald." He made motions with his hands to indicate size. "It is a large, green stone, and seems to glow under its own power."

"A gemstone, huh...?" Rouge hummed with a smirk, "Something of that size must be *expensive*..."

"*Priceless.*" Stone responded sternly. "And important to our cause."

"Can Rouge go with me?"

"Actually... I think Rouge's skills might be of use in *another* task."

Rouge crossed her arms, giving the man a glare. Splitting them up *already,* was he?

"So we just go into this storehouse, grab the emerald, and then bring it back here?"

"By we, you mean-"

Shadow's ears folded back a bit, "I'm not going if Rouge doesn't come with me."

"Shadow-"

"I promised I wouldn't leave her, and I keep my promises. Besides, she has *experience* with this sort of thing."
The hedgehog turned to give the bat a light smile, and Rouge ducked her head into the folds of her jacket collar to hide the blush creeping up into her cheeks.

Stone was quiet for a few moments, but then his smile returned. "Very well... Not to worry, I have full faith in you that you won't have *any trouble* obtaining what we're after."

Rouge frowned and leaned closer to Shadow, "I don't like this plan," She whispered, "It's still sketch. And even if I *am* there with you, what if you do the same thing out there that you did on the *train,* forgetting who and where you are?"

Shadow nodded, "I don't like it either, but if I'm as important as Stone claims I am, I don't think he'd let anything happen to me. And you'll be there to snap me back again."

"Hmph... I still don't-"

"I don't trust him either. It does seem very *convenient*..." Shadow's ears folded back a bit, "...But I *have* to know more about all of this, where I come from and what I'm meant to do."

"...If I'm right-"

"Then you can punch me if you want."

Rouge grumbled, and then nodded as she redirected back to the man. "Fine. But can we at least get something to eat and drink first? It's been a long few days."

Stone smiled, "I will get some coffee and scones ready."

As soon as the man's back was turned, Rouge reached around the chair and slipped the teleportation stone into Shadow's shoe. "If anything goes wrong, use it to get as *far away* from him as you can. I'll find you."

Shadow's ears twitched in a way to acknowledge that he understood.

Stone seemed to have not noticed their brief conversation, instead mumbling something about how much his boss loved his lattes...

The coffee and scones Stone had offered the pair had helped a little, but Shadow knew that it wasn't substantial enough to last. Coffee wasn't superior to fresh water, and scones, no substitute for good foods like fruit or vegetables... though *why* he had this opinion of sweets and caffeine was probably a result of events he couldn't remember.

He also wasn't quite sure how he'd managed to go as long as he had between eating something. It had been a few days since he'd been freed from the capsule, and all he'd had was potato chips and now a little teatime before heading out on this retrieval mission Stone wanted him to do.

He had a location in mind, and somehow, his brain was able to keep that straight despite trying to dump everything else. It was nice of Stone to offer him a watch that they could use to follow the signal right to the warehouse. He hoped it could work both ways so they could get back to the RV quicker. It was cold out here.

The directions led them up to a secluded driveway, winding its way up to a small cabin nestled amongst the trees. "...Quaint warehouse." He mumbled.

"This looks more like a *house house."* Rouge hissed, "I don't like it."

"Yeah... getting vibes from it too." He looked around for a moment, "...Wait here."

"What?"

"I don't want you to get hurt if something goes wrong, and if it *does*..." he very gently patted his shoe, "I got it covered."

"So you want me on lookout?"

Shadow nodded, "Between the snow and the dark trees, nobody should see you if you perch yourself somewhere to keep an eye on things... I trust you."

Rouge grumbled, "Okay... But you'd better not *get* into trouble, Quill Pickle."

"I'll be careful..."

He limped his way through the snow and up the walk, noticing a vehicle of some kind set beside it. A spare vehicle? *They shouldn't keep it out here in the cold if they want it to stay in good shape... Why do I know that!? Ugh. Stupid brain...!*

Shadow reached the front porch, and peered in the window, into the dark gloom of what was looking more and more like someone's home. What was he supposed to be getting? His memory was trying to dump that information again... A big, green emerald, right.

He looked back towards the trees where he'd just been, and sure enough, he'd lost sight of Rouge. She was there somewhere, he knew it.

He felt a humming, and he looked down to his foot. It was coming from inside of his shoe... the stone was reacting to something. "What is it...?" He whispered, "You picking something up too?"

He then wondered why he was talking to the stone as if it were alive. He didn't know why, but he had to admit that his leg hurt a little less with it pressed against his skin...

He tiptoed up towards the door, his feet making soft crunching sounds in the snow. This looked like a house, and as he turned the knob and stepped inside, he was certain it *was* a house.

The floor in the entryway was adorned with a rug, couches and a table sat in the living room, and... he could smell remnants of something having been cooked lately, the scent was still in the air. It was warm and welcoming inside as he stepped in, shaking snow from his shoes and wincing as his leg throbbed again.

He really needed to get that checked out...

...Wait. He was in a house. He was in someone's house... How did he wind up in someone's house?

He grimaced as his head throbbed, putting a hand to it as his teeth clenched. He felt like he should be able to *remember* why he was in someone's house, but like an Etch-A-Sketch in the hands of a toddler, his memory and reason for being here had been erased in seconds.

Shadow froze as he heard shuffling, his eyes on the partially-open door to one of the rooms. In the darkness, he could make out a human rolling over on the bed before settling once again.

...What am I doing? Why am I here? Do I know these people? I hope so, or else we're going to have a problem... I should go. I'll come back later, just in case-
Shadow gasped as he stepped back and then tumbled over something, and then that something yelped... *A dog.*

"Oh jeez-"

The dog was scrambling to its feet, barking loudly and its claws clacking on the wooden floor as Shadow started booking it towards the front door. Immense pain shot up his side as his leg slammed into the leg of a chair when he turned towards the front door, and then the piece of furniture came crashing down to the floor with a mighty sound.

There was shuffling in the house, the sound of the homeowners waking at the commotion. He had to get *out of there!* He stumbled on the rug running up to the front door, his feet shoving it back into a crumpled pile, but he managed to make it outside. He crashed into the snow off of the porch and then scrambled through the trees and bushes.

The dog chased him until he was well into the treeline on the other side of the road, the dog standing at the edge and continuing to bark. Shadow dropped down behind a fallen log, clutching his throbbing leg and afraid to move as he heard a voice call out from the house.

A man stood on the front porch, trying to call the dog back up to the house. After a moment, the dog seemed content with having run the intruder off and returned to his master's side, who was still looking out towards where Shadow was. In the darkness, Shadow was certain he couldn't see him, but he'd better not stick around for long.

After a second, the light on the front porch turned on and a woman appeared, peering out of the house... followed by another head of blue quills.

A hedgehog much like *him.*

Shadow needed answers. He needed to know what was going on. Stone never mentioned... *Stone!* That was it! He'd been sent by Stone to get... *something* from the house. But the man hadn't mentioned others like him residing in the home, or a dog, or... oh, jeepers, the man was *armed!?* What was Stone expecting Shadow to do against those odds!?

Destroy them without a thought.

Shadow didn't know where that thought came from, but it seemed both absolutely absurd and completely accurate. He crouched back down under the log and took in a deep breath as he heard the door close again across the road. He peeked out again, and while the lights inside remained on, all occupants had returned indoors, including the dog.

They weren't coming after him... At least... not *yet.*

He needed to get out of here before they did. He needed to get back. Which way was it? How had he gotten here?

"Oh...! I-I can't remember how I got here!" He whimpered, putting his hands to his head and then looking down at the tracker watch, its screen now cracked and empty from taking damage during his escape... It was useless to him now.

"Come on, brain. Remember... *Remember!"*

Then he noticed it... the mist... the green, glowing mist. It was here, and as he looked back towards the house, he could see it... it was coming from that house.

Was it the other hedgehog, like him? Was *he* giving off the strange glow that had lured him in like a light? Should he go back to the door and knock? Was he actually *supposed* to be here...?

An image flashed by his vision, one that he remembered seeing before, somewhere... He was falling... stars flying by him... and he saw the blue hedgehog reaching down towards him. His blue quills then ignited into gold, eyes of green burning into red as he screamed-

NO! HOLD ON! SHADOW!

Shadow snapped back into the woods, finding his hand reaching upwards... as if he'd been trying to grab the hedgehog's hand right back. He pulled it back down, grasping at his chest fur as he shook. Answers... he needed answers.

He rolled over in the snow, trying to get up to his feet once more. A sharp pain and weakness in his bad leg sent him crashing back down into the snow. "Augh... Gonna rest for a second... Yeah..." He hissed, "Rest... and maybe it'll all come back to me... Rouge was right... I never should have done this...! Oh jeepers, Rouge!"

She'd been here with him! Where was she now? Did she fly away to safety? Did she see where he went?

He looked around, but didn't see her. That had kind of been the point, though.

She'd circle back around and find him, surely she had seen where he'd gone and would find him when it was safe to do so...

...He just had to wait.

Chapter End Notes

Longer chapter, but a good one!

Chapter 12: Some Mornings Start Too Soon...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maddie sat up as she heard her husband leap out of the bed, and Ozzie barking from somewhere downstairs. Tom grabbed his weapon from the nightstand and hurried out the door, heading in the direction of the barking and the loud crash. Was it an intruder? An attacker?

Frightened whimpers caught her attention, and she got out of the bed and scooped Obsidian up into her arms, wrapping him in his blanket and holding him close to her chest. "Shh shh shh..." She whispered, bouncing him a little to try and keep him quiet and feeling his tiny claws scratch at her skin. "Shh... It's okay...!"

The sudden commotion had quieted, though Ozzie's barking continued, and as Maddie went to the door and peered out into the rest of the house, she heard footsteps on the ceiling above- *everyone* in the house was up *now.*

Sonic was rolling down the stairs from the attic before they were all the way down, Tails and Knuckles huddled at the top. "What's going on? Where's *Dad!?*" He asked.

"Shh..." Maddie hissed, listening as they stepped out into the hallway. They could see their father and husband standing on the front porch of the house, surveying the outdoors around the house in silence. One of the kitchen chairs had been knocked over and the rug scrunched up as if something had slid on it... there definitely had been *something* in the house, whether or not it was a person, they hadn't yet determined.

Ozzie only barked at things that didn't *belong* there... that, and *Kaia,* but *Kaia* would have stayed put to explain and apologize, not booked it out the front door.

Maddie looked up to the two boys still upstairs, "Stay up there, boys." She whispered, "We'll call for you if we need help."

Knuckles nodded, "Yes, Mother."

Maddie and Sonic hesitantly made their way to the front door, peering out as Tom lowered his weapon. "Well...? *Anything?*"

Tom was quiet for another moment, and then turned his head to look at Sonic from the corner of his eye. "...Sonic, check the house. See if anything was taken."

The blue hedgehog was gone in a bolt of blue and back in only a few seconds, setting the chair and rug back in place in the process. "Don't see anything out of place... Ozzie must've scared them off. But who'd try to steal from the *sheriff?*"

"Mmm... Not sure."

Obsidian squirmed under the blanket, "M-Mama...!"

Maddie stroked Obsidian's head as he whimpered in her arms, and then returned to the inside of the house. She turned on the lamp in the living room, settling down on the couch. "Sonic, can you get Obsidian's bottle from the fridge?"

Sonic hurried to the fridge and collected the bottle from the door, as well as a bottle of water for himself. "It's okay, guys." Sonic hollered, "You can come down now."

Tails hovered down from the attic after a moment, "Knuckles is gonna stay upstairs and guard the emerald. He says that must have been what they were after."

"We don't even know who *they were.*" Tom mumbled as he dragged Ozzie back into the house and closed the door. He looked to the clock and sighed, "It's early, but I doubt everyone's going to sleep after that."

Sonic and Tails shook their heads, and then Sonic shrugged. "But it *is* holiday break... no school. So..."

Tom and Maddie nodded, "You can play a few rounds while we get breakfast started."

The hedgehog and fox smiled a bit, and then hurried into the living room to turn on the video games. Knuckles came down to join them a few minutes later, the Master Emerald firmly tucked into the canvas bag Maddie had given him to carry it in.

Maddie moved from the couch and into the kitchen as her husband dug through the cabinet for a pan. "What do you think...?" She whispered.

"Not sure, Maddie..." Tom mumbled back, "...Saw some footprints, but they were mixed in with the tracks on the driveway, hard to know which way they went." He looked out into the snowy yard through the window, "...We'll poke around a bit more when the sun's up. Knuckles could probably track them."

"Fair... It worries me, though. We were all caught off-guard just now."

"I know. One of the perks of living in the sleepy town of Green Hills, I guess..." Tom gave a light smirk, "...The only action you see is a madman in a towering mech with a mustache."

"Robotnik wouldn't have ran away..." Maddie sighed, looking down as Obsidian peeked out from under the blanket, tears welling in his eyes. "...It's okay, Obsidian... Mama and Daddy won't let you get hurt again... I promise."

Obsidian rested his head on her chest again, giving a sniffle. "Tanku Mama..."

Sonic looked out towards the window as they waited for their game to load up, out into the dark, snowy woods that surrounded them. "...What do you think, Knuckles?" He whispered, "Not a raccoon?"

Knuckles' hand gripped the strap of his canvas bag, brows furrowing. "Ozzie has alerted us to many a troublesome creature in the yard... But none of *those* creatures have set the Master

Emerald *alight.*"

"Hoo boy... He is not going to like this. How to start? Uh... *'Good morning, Sheriff Wachowski. I'm sure you remember me? From a couple weeks ago... when I infiltrated your house and... caused an incident...'* Yeah, *that's* gonna go smooth."

Agent Tower adjusted in the seat as he realized he was hunched over the steering wheel, sitting up straight again. Given his previous history with the Wachowskis and the little ones occupying their home, *any* engagement was going to start out poorly. The family would be defensive from minute one, and Tower would have to find some way to convince them that he came on good terms.

"Not here to hurt you or take you anywhere. I'm just here to *spy on you*-... Yeah, not any better. But yeah, those guys tailing behind me by a few hours? They're looking for some escaped government experiment, apparently. But let's not focus on that right now. Let's focus on *you...' This is going to be a disaster.*"

The roads and landscape had been blanketed in snow, but that would be common in Montana this time of year. This in mind, the roads had been treated so that it was more of a light slush that the agent had to navigate as he turned the corner and approached the Wachowski residence. His personal belongings were few, and stuffed into a few duffel bags sitting in the passenger seat of his truck awaiting him dropping them off at his new abode directly in town.

All he had to do was explain to them that he was moving into town to keep an eye on their activity day-to-day, and that if they saw other agents wandering the woods, not to worry about it.

"Hoo boy..." He hissed through his teeth again as he pulled up on the side of the road and climbed out.

It was still plenty early in the morning, but he could see Sheriff Wachowski and the red echidna, Knuckles, were standing out in the front yard and appeared to be examining the yard and drive. what could they be looking for?

The man looked up from the ground and his eyes met Tower's, before they furrowed. "Great. Should've *known* one of you would be out here again."

Tower lifted a hand, "I'm not here to make trouble, Sheriff Wachowski... I just want to talk. Even unarmed, see?" He gestured to his belt, empty of any weapons, even a taser.

"Hmm..." Knuckles frowned, "...You are one of the humans who invaded our home, startling Obsidian."

"I am... and I am deeply sorry for the trouble and emotional damage that might have caused you all." Tower crouched down a little, "I'm not here to hurt anyone today."

Sheriff Wachowski's hands went to his hips, "Then why *are* you here?"

"Per the orders of my higher-ups, even higher than Commander Walters, I have been assigned the task of... observing them on a more regular basis."

"Oh?"

"The event in question a little while ago was enough proof to provide to the higher-ups that rushing in with weapons and making them feel agitated is not a good way to get an idea of their behavior. So, I suggested that they station an officer here in Green Hills to observe them on a day-to-day basis, to see who they really are. I wasn't expecting them to choose *me,* or for the decision to be made so *quickly.*"

"So you are here to spy on us and our family." Knuckles snarled.

"Spy... might be a bit too much. I don't believe that you all would intentionally harm people, but I also think that if something like what happened with Robotnik occurs again, we can be ready and know what you're capable of... I want to be able to see you as yourselves, not as you are when you have to fight for your lives and the lives of your loved ones."
He looked down as his pocket buzzed, and he frowned as he saw the dots approaching their position. "Oh joy, they're ahead of schedule."

"Who?"

Tower sighed, "There's a convoy of agents approaching Green Hills. They're not here for you all... they're looking for an individual called *Project Shadow*-"

Knuckles' eyes widened, "He is *free?* I *must* inform the fox!"

"Knuckles, wait-" Sheriff Wachowski tried to stop his oldest, but the echidna was already rushing into the house. "Great..."

"They *know* about him?"

The sheriff sighed, "Apparently during their little *Mist-adventure...* Tails and Knuckles had a vision of someone named Shadow being attacked on board a space station."

Tower's eyes widened, "They saw what happened...! I could get so much from them...!"

"Pardon?"

"I-I... Sorry. My grandfather was aboard that station when he was a kid and mentioned Shadow sometimes when he was mumbling in his sleep, but I was never able to get anything out of him, and of course my *higher-ups* wouldn't give me the details-"
Tower shook out of his startled rambling, his brows furrowing. "...I think he might be in danger if the other agents find him, but the kids will *also* be in danger if they try to help."

Sheriff Wachowski frowned, "Come inside. We need to have a talk with the boys..."

Chapter End Notes

And we're back with our main cast! Rudely awakened by an intruder to their humble abode...

Chapter 13: Heroes Before Rule-Followers, Or... Something Like That

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shadow hadn't intended on falling asleep, but one moment he was shuffling his way through the snow, trying to find his own tracks in hopes of following them back to Rouge, and the next... he was lying down in a dark space, the light of morning shining down through a small hole in the wall... a cave of some sort.

Had she put him here? Did she hide him here in this cave and then leave to go find food or something? His mind felt dull... refusing to form more than basic thoughts.

The cave wasn't exactly warm, but it was certainly warmer than the snowy landscape outside, and quiet. He was safe here, at least for now.

No food down here, though. And he'd need to get back to Rouge somehow... He wished he could remember how he'd gotten here. Other than his leg, he didn't feel hurt, so he doubted that he'd fallen into the cave.

Now that the sun was up, he might be able to follow tracks, but there could be tons of those out in the woods...

So far his memory problems had led them to nothing but trouble. Now, he was lost, trapped in a cave, and still with an injured leg. He'd think that after a few days, the pain would have at least evened out. He knew for certain now that it hadn't just been stiff from lack of use in the capsule; he was *hurt,* something was *wrong* with his leg, but what?

He gingerly ran his hand along the fur, trying not to put too much outside pressure on it, as that seemed to bring about the most pain. Was it broken? Surely putting *any* weight on it would have confirmed that by now, so perhaps not... Knowing all of this scientific stuff certainly made sense, now that he knew he was raised in a laboratory environment. He would have picked up on that sort of thing... but even with Stone's explanation, there seemed to be missing pieces, parts of the puzzle kept sealed off for a reason...

Shadow reached into his shoe as he felt a thrumming, pulling out the teleporting stone and holding it out in his palm. It was glowing softly again, the light pulsing with each vibration. "What am I supposed to do *now...?* If I go looking for her, I'll just get lost again, and probably forget who I am again and limp myself right off a cliff or something...I don't suppose *you* have any ideas..."

That depends...

Shadow sat up straight as he heard a soft, quiet voice murmur from somewhere around him. "W-Who's there?"

You seem to be in trouble... what is wrong, little one?

Shadow looked back to the stone as it thrummed in his palm, was the stone... *talking to him?* Or perhaps someone else was speaking *through* the stone. Either one sounded plausible at this point.
"I... I'm lost. I was trying to... I was following some questionable advice, trying to get answers about who I am and where I come from... and then I lost my way and I don't know how to get back to my friend."

I see... It sounds as though you are more than just physically *lost, then... You do not know who you are...*

"They say I was made for a purpose, but I don't know what that means, or how to find out. It sounds like the only people who could really tell me what I was made for are... *Dead."*

And... someone else gets to choose what you do with your life?

"Well... I guess so. I mean, if they made me to *do* something-"

You have a soul, and a mind capable of making your own choices, yes...?

"I... guess so?"

If those that sought to choose your destiny for you have passed... who remains to choose what you do...?

Shadow was quiet, thinking this over. He certainly didn't *feel* like he was a cure for all diseases, and to achieve that goal would probably mean he would spend a lot of time in a lab, being tested on and having his blood constantly drawn and used. He rubbed his arms as he thought about the painful, miserable life that might lead to...

He didn't feel like a *weapon either.* To be a lab rat was a life of pain, and to be a weapon was a life of inflicting pain onto *others,* and he hated that idea just as much. The idea of spending his life hunting down people, intentionally hurting them just because someone told him to...

...that was what Stone had expected him to do last night. To be a tool for his own ambitions and to take that stone from that home, that *family*- by force, if necessary. Shadow couldn't- no, he *wouldn't* do that! *Especially* not if using force to get what you wanted was how he lost his *own* family.

Be brave... Live for me, okay...? Live for me... Be good...

The girl, Maria, her voice whispered in his ear once more... *'Be good.' That* didn't sound too hard, he could do *that...* and he *would.*

He tightened his grasp on the white stone, lifting his head. "...*I* get to choose what I want to do, and what I want to do... Is to be *me.*"

And... who are you, little one...?

Shadow grimaced as he got up to his feet, leaning against the wall of the cave. "I... Will figure that out as I go. I need to find Rouge, she said she'd find me if I got to safety, but now..." He took a few limping steps towards the entrance to the cave, "...Now I'm worried she might be in trouble-"

He stopped again as he heard a low rumbling overhead, and then dropped back down to the ground as he saw movement pass by the entrance. Voices echoed down the tunnel, there were several humans out there.

"Search the area! It can't have gotten too far!"

Shadow growled, putting his hands to his head. "Jeepers Creepers...!" The agents Rouge and Stone had mentioned were chasing them down had arrived, and were right outside. "Now what, disembodied voice...!?"

Fear not, little one... Remain, and I will hide you...

"What do you mean, *'Do not aid him!?'*"

Knuckles had never been so angry as he was right now- well, that wasn't *quite* true. He had been *more* enraged when he'd been tricked by Robotnik into fighting Sonic, only for Robotnik to steal the Master Emerald right out from under their noses.

This was quite enraging *too,* however.

Tails stood off to his side, hands clasped together tightly as he looked at their father and the agent he'd just allowed into their home- this time apparently to tell them to stay put. "But Dad, he *needs* us!"

"It's too dangerous, kiddo." Agent Tower, as he had been introduced, crouched down closer to Tails' eye level. "I know you want Shadow to be safe, so do I, but I don't think it's a good idea for all of you to go out there and get your parents in *more* trouble."

"This is so *unfair!*" Sonic stamped his foot, his quills flickering a little. "What if he was the one who came into the house last night? What if he was just trying to find somewhere safe and we scared him off!?"

"Sonic, we don't know everything about what happened last night." Maddie stood off to the side, Obsidian nestled in a sling strung across her chest and appearing to be oblivious to the argument as he slept. "I know how you want to help, but we might be more harm than good going out there."

The hedgehog was practically vibrating, but a hand from Knuckles on his shoulder made him stop and take a deep breath, fading the blue sparks away once more. "Okay... Okay. So what do you want us to *do?* How can we help without getting in trouble?"

Agent Tower bit his lip, "That's the thing, I don't know... Tell you what. For now, I need you to go and tell the *other two* not to go into the woods right now."

"You know about Silver and Blaze?" Tom asked.

Agent Tower nodded, "I saw them in your truck on our way out from last time. Didn't report them, I assure you."

Sonic sighed, "Okay, I'll go tell them."

"And then come *straight back,* Sonic!" Tom hollered as his son took off out of the house, but he didn't look like he was certain the hedgehog heard.

"If Shadow can make it to the lake, then maybe Kaia can protect him." Tails hoped.

"Perhaps, Fox..." Knuckles murmured solemnly, "I am not certain she is aware of any of this at the moment. The surface of the lake has frozen over in the approaching cold, sealing her below the ice and perhaps unable to come to anyone's aid until spring. I only hope he does not try to seek shelter in the cabin of Carl. He will be *far* less patient in pulling the trigger than Father was this morning."

Tails gripped his tails tightly, ears folding down. "Poor Shadow... he didn't even *do* anything...!"

Agent Tower bent down, "Your dad told me that you guys have seen him before... sort of. When the attack happened..."

"Yes...?"

"We witnessed a vision of the events." Knuckles confirmed.

Agent Tower smiled a bit, "Tell me everything you can remember..."

Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-tap-!

Silver's ears pricked and he looked up from his coloring book as he heard a knock on the window, and his eyes widened as he saw Sonic there, bouncing up and down. What was he doing there? And was he really that *cold?*

Silver went to the window and opened it, gasping as the icy air blew in. "Brrr! Make it *quick,* Sonic! You'll make all the warm air *outside!*"

Sonic grasped onto the sill, "Where's Blaze?"

"She went to the clinic with Miss Allison for the day. I decided to stay home instead. Why?" Silver gave him a slight glare, "Did your older brother send you on an errand on behalf of *Eros?*"

"*Perfect*- Wait, what? *No!* Look, I need your help."

The pale hedgehog crossed his arms, "Oh? With *what?*"

"There's another hedgehog out there in the woods and there are humans trying to hunt him down! I need your help to get him somewhere safe."

"What did he *do?*"

"Does it matter!? Come on! Get your boots and gloves and let's go!"

Silver frowned, "Sonic, I can't just go out there to go chasing after some random hedgehog!"

"Come on, don't you *trust* me?"

"*You* were the one who told me that all of the cars in the school yard were *supposed* to be arranged by *color.* I spent a solid hour *'fixing'* them, and then got in trouble with Miss Allison for it."

"Yeah, but you gotta admit, the look on the teachers' faces was *priceless.*"

"*Sonic.*"

"Okay okay okay. Listen, Shadow's a nice guy, from what Tails and Knuckles told me. But he's in trouble and we might be the only ones who can help him!"

Silver rolled his eyes, "If Tails and Knuckles like him so much, then why don't *they* help you help him?"

"Don't wanna be a *hero,* Silver?"

"I'd rather be warm, indoors, and *not* grounded for life."
The pale hedgehog then closed the window, turning away from the blue hedgehog on the other side. He crossed his arms and lifted his nose, waiting until he heard the whoosh of Sonic leaving once more before returning to his coloring book. He picked up the marker, hovering over the image.

"...Ugh. He's gonna get himself blown up out there if I don't keep an eye on him...!"

He put the cap back on the marker and then got up. "Okay, leave a note for Miss Allison, and then get shoes, gloves, and a *coat. Sonic* can freeze out there all he likes, but I've already had the flu once in my life and *no thank you-!*"

Chapter End Notes

Three teenage hedgehogs walk into the woods- XD

Chapter 14: Cold As Ice

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"...You know, I don't think he's coming back like you told him to."

"Nnnnope."

Agent Tower groaned as he drove along the edge of the woods, now on the search for a flash of blue to signal where the rebellious teenage hedgehog had gone. He had to be out here somewhere, he *had* to be. Knuckles and Tails were quite irritated that he'd just bail on them to go looking on his own, and even the *baby* had seemed upset by it, but it just wasn't a good idea for all of them to head out into the woods, even if it *was* just to haul their son and brother back home.

So that task was left up to Tower. Joy.

"Gotta practice my *'I'm not mad, just disappointed'* look. *'Your dad is going to ground you for life when I get you home...'* Not really experienced with kids, especially not super-powered alien kids who can take out the power grid if they get angry enough... or lock you in a cycle of traumatizing visions until- *Huh?"*

Agent Tower pulled the truck up to a stop as he saw something glinting out in the trees, something big and metallic in the snow. "Okay... Rule number one, investigate unusual activity around Green Hills... Got it."

Putting the truck in park and turning it off, he climbed out of the truck, keeping his firearm within his grasp as he started through the trees. He had kept it in the truck when he'd approached the Wachowskis, but this was a different case. He hoped this wasn't part of Carl's property, he'd been informed of the man's general behavior towards intruders and the last thing Tower wanted was to find himself face to face with a chainsaw blade.

He moved slowly closer to the object, interest piqued as he found it was a capsule of some kind. Metal, round in shape, and bearing what appeared to be a massive yellow button on top of it. Odd design, but it wasn't the design of the capsule that had his interest... it was the bright red, mustached insignia on the front.

"Some of Dr. Robotnik's tech... must've been missed during the clean-up." He returned his pistol to its holster as he approached, "What could be *in* it, though...?"

Only one way to find out.

Pushing said giant, yellow button was going to be easier said than done. Agent Tower supposed it would take a lot of weight or force to shove it down into the unlock position... But then again, the capsule was diagonal a bit, and there was a tree right beside it...

Now he *really* hoped this wasn't Carl's property, because he was about to perhaps look a little stupid. That was his thought at least, until he heard voices in the trees.

"This is a *very* bad idea, you know."

"Oh come on, it's an adventure! And between the two of us, what could happen?"

Agent Tower's brows furrowed as he saw Sonic walking through the trees, as well as Silver, whose silvery fur would have made it hard to discern him from the snow if not for the dark-colored, puffy coat he was wearing. Silver stood a bit taller than Sonic, and looked less than enthused to be out here in the cold. Tower couldn't blame him.

"Psst! *You two.*" He hissed.
The two hedgehogs' ears pricked, and then they turned towards the agent. "*Get over here. Now.*"

Sonic grumbled, leading the pair over to Tower's side. "*Busted...*" He mumbled.

"Uh... *Yeah.*" Tower glared over the two, "I told you to tell Silver *not* to come out here, and then your *dad* told you to *come right back* when you were done. And instead? You're out here directly disobeying *both of us.*"

"I didn't *want* to come out here." Silver responded, "But I had a feeling he was going to get himself hurt if somebody didn't keep an eye on him."

"*Excuse me!?* Look, Mister Agent or whoever you are. I managed to evade capture by your buddies *before*-"

"And then they caught you on Oahu."

"Well, yeah, but I busted out!"

"*Your mom* broke you out."

"And then I took out that giant robot all by myself-"

"After nearly getting you and your parents crushed, I've heard."

Agent Tower and Sonic were locked in a glaring contest, and Tower could see Silver slowly backing away out of the corner of his eye, hands raised in surrender. When the blue hedgehog finally looked away, his eyes moving down to his shoes, the agent rolled his eyes, and then looked back to the container before him. "...If you're going to be out here, the least you can do is lend a hand."

"Doing what?"

"See that big yellow button on top of this thing? I think if you do that spinny thing of yours, you might be able to get enough power behind it to press it and get it open. Less work on my part."

Sonic's enthusiasm reignited as he grinned wide, "Oh yeah! Stand back!"

Silver and the man stepped back as Sonic's quills crackled with blue energy, and then in a bolt he shot up the trunk of the tree, hovering near the top in a orb of sparks before flying down. "Cannonball!" He announced as he came back, and Agent Tower lifted his hands up to block any debris from hitting him as there was a bright flash of light. When he felt nothing, he opened his eyes again, and saw that Silver had raised a glowing shield of sorts in front of them to block the splintered wood.

"Huh...Nicely done."

Silver smiled as he lowered the shield. "You think so? Thank you, Mr. Agent, sir."

"Call me Abe."

"Abe...Okay."

The capsule hissed, and then the sides folded upwards. Agent Tower expected something to come spilling out, but there was nothing... not at first.

Once he'd approached however, he could see that something *was* in the capsule... something that made his eyes widen and his stomach drop. "Oh my god-"

It was a white bat, a bat that looked like she belonged on the same planet as the other alien newcomers. She was lying on the bottom of the capsule, stiff and pale. How long had she been in that capsule? Had there been enough oxygen? Was she... *dead?*

He carefully crawled into the capsule, removing a glove to feel for a pulse. She felt incredibly cold, but he still felt a very slow heartbeat... Not dead, but perhaps close.

"Oh my god... come here, Beautiful..." He whispered, removing his coat and wrapping it around her. "Just hang in there, we're gonna get you some help, okay...? How long have you been out here...? Sonic, run home and tell your mom to meet me at the clinic and then for *Pete's sake, stay there!*"

"Yes sir!"

The blue blur was gone, and Agent Tower looked down to the remaining hedgehog, "As for *you,* Silver... Come with me. Try to stay out of sight."

"Of course..."

Blaze had been sitting under the front desk when the front door's bell rang, and then it was a sudden rush of voices and humans milling about.

"Maddie? What's going on? I thought you had today off."

"I do, but we have another little girl being brought in. Sonic, get the door!"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

Blaze peeked out from under the desk, seeing a man entering the office with another traveler like them wrapped in his coat and in his arms. When she saw the pale fur, she was worried it was Silver again, but then she processed that Miss Maddie had said it was a girl, and she saw Silver duck in behind the man and then hurry over to hide under the desk with her. "Silver-"

"Hi, Blaze." Silver murmured, settling in the corner and both of them peeking out as Maddie took the newcomer into her arms.

"Oh my god, she's *freezing...!*"

"That's what I was saying." The man replied, "But she's still alive at the moment."

"Nice work getting her here, Agent Tower."

"*Agent...?*" Miss Allison frowned.

Agent Tower shook his head, "Well, it's not exactly right to always introduce yourself as *'Hi, I'm an agent of the government sent to keep an eye on Sheriff Wachowski's alien children-'* But!" He raised his hands as the woman pointed her pen at his face, "I'm not interested in hurting or taking *any* of them away, I *swear!*"

"He's cool, Allison." Maddie informed as she disappeared into the hall.

Allison glared at the man for several seconds, before finally putting her pen back in her pocket. "Alright... If Maddie says you're cool, then fine. But I'm *watching you,* mister. I love those kids, and if you do anything sketch, you'll be *sorry...!*"

"Understood, Miss..."

"*Riley. Allison Riley.*"

"...Miss Riley."

As Miss Allison and Miss Maddie hurried into the back, the man stayed, standing at the edge of the desk before looking down to the pair as Sonic came around and sat down beside them. Blaze huddled a little closer to Silver, but she recognized the man. "Y-You are the man who saw us in Mr. Tom's truck and didn't tell anybody."

"I am. Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt you... I *am* going to *mad at you,* Sonic."

"Yeah yeah..." Sonic pouted, "But if we hadn't been out there, you wouldn't have gotten that capsule open!"

"Fair. But your dad *still* told you to come back and *I* told you to keep these two out of sight of the other agents out there."

Blaze grabbed onto Silver's hands, "What will happen should they discover us?"

"I will *protect* you." Silver promised, squeezing her hands tightly. "That's what a good brother does."

Blaze smiled back, pressing her forehead against his shoulder. "That you are... A fantastic brother and friend..."
She then looked out towards the door leading back into the rest of the clinic, "Do you believe she will be alright?"

The man sighed, "...I hope so. I have some questions I want to ask her when she comes to... What're *you* doing?"

Blaze looked down to the book she'd been reading before the commotion, and then held it up. "I am learning more about this place."

"American history, huh?"

"Indeed... Your country as a whole has lost much of the integrity it seems to have had when it was born. That's what Miss Allison says, anyway."

"Yeah... Even human decency worldwide seems to have plummeted... But don't worry, there are still good people out there."

Blaze clutched her book close to her chest, "Yes... And I am grateful that many of them live here in Green Hills..."

A few minutes passed, and then Miss Allison appeared at the door with Agent Tower's coat, which he took. "Come on, kiddos. Miss Maddie thinks it'll be safer for you back here."

Silver helped Blaze to her feet, and Sonic followed them through the doorway. Agent Tower watched the trio pass, and then Blaze heard him mumble something to Miss Allison, who gave a nod, and then he walked towards the front door.

"What was that about?" Sonic asked.

"He's gonna head out so nobody gets suspicious seeing his truck outside." Miss Allison remarked, and then guided the trio back through the halls and into one of the rooms.

The newcomer was now unwrapped from the coat, and she could see it was a bat, about her own age. Her fur was even more white than Silver's, and she was dressed in dark clothes and her wings were unfolded across the table, which Miss Maddie appeared to be examining carefully.

"How's she doing?" Sonic asked.

"Pulse is slow, body temperature is low, but slowly rising..." Maddie stroked the girl's head with her hand, "I was worried it was hypothermia, but... I think she's gone into a state of *hibernation.* Some bat species do that... But her coloring suggests possible albinism, so I want to check for any effects of that-"

"What's albinism?" Silver asked.

"It's a condition where the coloring in your fur, skin, and eyes doesn't happen, making the fur and skin white." Blaze answered, "Right, Miss Allison?"

"Right. The coloring is caused by something called melanin, and if you don't have any or not enough, then it's called Albinism. It can cause health problems, even blindness or deafness."

Silver looked at his fur, "Am *I* albinism?"

"The word would be *albino,* and no, Silver, you're not." Allison ruffled his chest fur, "You're just silver and fluffy."

Blaze tugged on Maddie's coat, "Will she be okay?"

"She appears to be stable, her vitals are slowly moving up into normal ranges, I think she'll be just fine, Blaze." Maddie confirmed, "Though the fact that she was sealed in one of Robotnik's machines *can't* be good news. Not to mention this nice knot on the back of her head... I think she took a decent hit. Gotta check for concussion."

"Do you believe he is back?"

Sonic grumbled, "Wouldn't be the first time..."

"If he is," Silver took Blaze's hand again, "I will do everything I can to protect you, Blaze."

"And I you, Silver..."

"Yeah, about that."
Sonic crossed his arms, "Silver says that you have powers too. How come you don't *use* 'em?"

Blaze looked away, "I simply do not find need of them. Nor do I seek to give out information on their properties at this time."

Silver nodded, "Which means *'mind your own business.'*"

The blue hedgehog frowned, looking away from the cat as well. "Hmph... Whatever."

Chapter End Notes

Yay! Rescue Mission! Just not the one they were looking for XD

Don't worry, a Triple-S meeting will be happening eventually!

Chapter 15: So Here's the Thing-

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"...We can't keep this up. We have to think about what's best for the colony..."

"Just give her one more chance! I know she can with a little help!"

"You and I both know she can't. Look at her, the only time she'd be able to hunt is when we don't."

"You can't expect me to-"

"I am asking you to... or else both of you will starve come spring..."

"...Forgive me, love..."

Rouge wanted to cover her ears, to block out the voices of her past. Her colony, her whole colony, up and gone! She was just a child, how could they *do* that to her!?

How could *The Guild* do that to her!?

How could *Shadow*-

No... No. Shadow hadn't left her, he had made sure she knew where he was and that he'd be back... No. This wasn't Shadow's fault... it was that *human's* fault. Stone. This was *his* fault...

"SOMEBODY HELP!" She shrieked, her voice echoing off of the walls of her metal cell as she kicked at the walls, trying to get free. Whatever Stone had used to knock her out had been solid, she could still *feel* and *hear* in her ears the firm thunk her head had made when it made contact.

She was cold... so cold... she had to...had to stay *awake*...

Dark... cold, empty darkness... shivering... shaking... dogs barking in the distance...

...Wait. Dogs barking?... Shadow!

Rouge's eyes opened, finding the darkness lift a little. The air around her was warmer, and smelled vaguely of sterilizing chemicals... She tried to move, but her entire body was still stiff and ached even as she tried to take in a deep breath, and her head was pounding like a drum.

"Will she be okay?"

"She appears to be stable, her vitals are slowly moving up into normal ranges, I think she'll be just fine, Blaze...Though the fact that she was sealed in one of Robotnik's machines can't

be good news."

"Do you believe he is back?"

"Wouldn't be the first time..."

Voices, young voices and one that seemed almost motherly in tone, whispered in her ears... She was inside somewhere... was it a home?

Had someone rescued her? Why? What did they want with her?

"Hey... How are you *feeling...?* Can you *hear* me...?"

The voice came from somewhere else in the room, but where? It sounded like the girl she'd heard, the one named Blaze.

Her ears pricked as she picked up movement, and then she saw the silhouette of a shape tiptoeing towards her... a cat from her world. "You..." she whispered.

"It is alright." The cat sat down beside her, "Miss Maddie and Miss Allison believed it would be less stressful if the first person you encountered when waking was closer to your kind than human. I am Blaze."

"Wuh...where..."

"You are safe now. My brother found you out in the snow, and brought you here to the clinic, where our guardian and her friends could tend to you... They said you were going into something called hibernation."

A clinic, like a vet clinic? That would explain the sterile smell and the distant barking of dogs, but it was still concerning. What kind of tests did these humans do on her while she was out of it? But most importantly... "Where... is *Shadow...?*"

Blaze's ears pricked, and then she shook her head. "We do not know just yet... Abe said that there are agents out in the woods searching for him, but it is far too dangerous for us to go out looking ourselves."

The darkness then lessened as the door on the other side of the room opened, and Rouge winced at the sudden light in her eyes, shutting them tightly.

"Sorry, sweetheart..." A feminine voice cooed, and then the light faded again and Rouge opened her eyes once more to see a woman with curly, honey-colored hair bend down beside Blaze. "...Nice to see you're not blind or deaf, though. We were worried about that."

"*Why...?*"

"Your fur. White fur often comes along with either one or both of those conditions."

Rouge's ears folded back a little, and she shoved her head deeper into the large dog bed she'd been laid on. It didn't appear to have been used, which she was grateful for.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you *upset.* I think it's beautiful-"

"It's not." Rouge grumbled, "It's not pretty or beautiful... just a *curse.*"

"Do not think that," Blaze scolded softly, "I too have traits that I do not care for, but I would never consider them a *curse.*"

"Did your *'traits'* make your whole colony abandon you when you were a toddler? What good is a bat with white fur? They can't blend in with the darkness and hunt right...!"

"And yet, you've survived this long." The woman remarked, "That means you're a fighter, and that they were *wrong.*"

Rouge grumbled, wincing a bit as she tried to stretch her wings.

"Miss Allison, she is a friend of Shadow's. I am worried for him even more knowing that he is out there all alone." Blaze wrapped her arms around herself, "It is unfortunate that our presence here makes the human government so... *agitated.*"

"I love that you want everyone to be safe and sound, Blaze..." Miss Allison put an arm around the cat, "...It demonstrates a lot about your character... You have a name?"

Rouge was quiet for a moment, and then sighed. "...Rouge..."

"French for red?"

"Yeah... My... My mama said I was born screaming in rage and red as a rose."

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Rouge."

"Hmph."
Rouge clenched her teeth, and then unfolded her wings entirely and lifted herself into a sitting position. "Ow... ow ow ow-"

"Do not overexert yourself." Blaze warned, "You are still recovering from nearly *freezing.*"

"Ugh... Don't remind me... I have to find Shadow before Stone does."

"*Stone?*"

"He's some guy that works for another guy called Robotnik-"

"Robotnik!?"
Allison's tone was nearly a growl, and Blaze ducked behind the woman, her fur puffing up. "Is he *back?*"

"N-No. Stone said he was on some sabbatical... You're *familiar* with him, though."

"Pssh! He tried to blow our town off the map with a mega-mech powered by the Master Emerald. Yeah, *we know him."*

Rouge's eyes widened, "That was what Stone wanted Shadow to get for him!"

Blaze looked up to Allison, "So then it *was* Shadow who entered Miss Maddie and Mister Tom's home last night. Ozzie must've startled him and he fled. We must alert the others of this."

"Agreed."
Allison stood up and went to the door, "You two stay here-"

Rouge fought to get up to her feet, "I'm coming with you..."

"Rouge-"

"You said I'm a fighter..." The bat pulled herself up and stood up straight, "...*I can make it."*

Stone slammed his fist on the console. He'd lost *both* of them now!

The entire region had become swallowed in this glowing, low-level haze of the energy Shadow had been putting out- not enough to affect the machinery, but enough to cloak Shadow's signal. He didn't know where it was coming from, but based on the lack of focus to the GUN agents' movement through the trees, it seemed to be preventing them from finding Shadow either.

If Shadow left the haze, then Stone could follow, but for now, he was very much invisible, and not a sound had been heard from him since he'd approached the Wachowski house. A ping from the capsule had also alerted him that it had been opened, which meant either the bat had figured out how to get loose from inside or someone *else* had freed her, and unlike the way Shadow had been, she wasn't giving off a radiant pulse of Chaos energy, there was no way to track her.

A severe error on his part, he should have kept the capsule close by and guarded. No matter, he had a feeling he knew exactly where to check for her... once she was out of the way, then he could refocus on Shadow. He was out there and still wounded from whatever injury was ailing him, he couldn't run very fast on his own, and he was more interested in avoiding the GUN agents wandering the woods than Stone.

Still... Stone looked at the notes written of Project Shadow's behavior prior to the ARK Incident. Energy manipulation, strength, speed, vicious aggression towards others. Everything checked out except for the *aggression* part.

This little hedgehog hadn't seemed vicious or aggressive in the slightest, barely even *grumpy.* Was that a result of his time in the capsule? Had the scientists of the past tried to quell that behavior, following what he'd uncovered was an attempt on one scientist's life? It seemed that the project hadn't liked Dr. Walters for some reason, snapping and nearly taking the man's arm with it.

Fifty years was plenty of time to try and rewire Project Shadow's head. Had that all been erased, leaving behind this confused, childish hedgehog who seemed more interested in *seeing* the world than *subduing* it...

...No matter. There had to be a way to bring that back to the surface. He just had to remember what he'd been put through, the horrors of his adversaries...

Stone pressed a button, "Drones, search the woods for the signature. Maintain stealth mode and report any findings."

He, meanwhile, was going to make sure that Plan B was operational. He turned towards the back of the RV, his eyes falling on the large, metal framing as it currently rested in sleep mode.

"Your turn will come..."

"Miss Maddie, she is *awake!"*

Blaze's urgent voice caught the woman's attention, and she turned to see the young bat was waving off Allison's attempts to help her as she limped down the hall. "I'm *fine, really...!*" she hissed.

"Maddie, Rouge. Rouge, Maddie." Allison introduced with a shrug and a smile.

"Well hello, Rouge..." Maddie bent down to her level, "How are you *feeling?*"

"T-That doesn't matter. I'm well enough to help."

"Help?"

"She was traveling with Shadow before they were attacked by Robotnik's companion Stone-" Blaze began, before jumping as Sonic popped up from behind the table.

"Oh no no no-" Sonic informed, "*'Companion'* is not the right word for Agent Stone. The proper term is *'Boy-Toy-'*"

"*Sonic!*" Maddie scolded, smacking him on the head with the papers in her hands.

Silver popped up as well, walking around the table towards Rouge. The bat seemed quite surprised to see the two hedgehogs, taking a step back. "Please, don't be frightened. We're not going to harm you."

"Correct." Blaze assured, "Silver is my brother and Sonic is a friend."

"So... How many like us *are* there in this town?"

"Erm... Including you?" Silver counted on his fingers for a moment, "...Seven. Sonic, his three brothers, and then the three of us."

"Eight, if we include Shadow." Rouge remarked, "Wow... Maybe he'd actually be *safe* here, then."

"Erm... Don't know about that." Sonic grumbled, "The human government doesn't even know about Silver or Blaze yet, and me and my brothers are skating on thin ice as it is."

"You said you were with Shadow before Stone?" Maddie redirected the conversation. A proper get-to-know-me session might have to wait.

"Right right." Rouge replied, "I was the one who broke him out of his stasis nap. My original intentions for it weren't... *the best,* but we've smoothed it over- *I think...* Whatever. We were headed this way because Shadow said he could see this big, green glow coming from here and some *voice* told him to go to Green Hills."

"That'd be here!" Sonic announced with his hands on his hips, "But a green glow... Weird. Hmm. Maybe Tails can figure it out."

"Anyways, we ran into Stone before we actually got to Green Hills. He told Shadow some story about how the government attacked the lab where Shadow was created and killed a bunch of people trying to get to Shadow, including the grandfather of some guy named *Robotnik* who Stone works for- *sketchy last name,* by the way. He told us to go to a storehouse to collect this giant gem for him, but when we got there, it wasn't a storehouse-"

"It was *our* house?" Maddie suspected.

"Right... The whole thing seemed sketch from the start, and Shadow sorta agreed with me. Shadow had me on lookout while he went in, but then something went wrong. I was going to fly in and pull him out, but then I got a nasty hit to the back of the head and woke up inside that prison thing. I had a feeling that Stone wanted me out of the picture so he could have Shadow for himself, but that's going a bit *far*-"

"So he's got Shadow somewhere and trying to nab the Master Emerald back." Sonic clenched his fists, "That's enough info for *me-"*

"Uh uh, Mister!" Maddie scolded, waving a firm motherly finger at her son. "You are still very, *very grounded* from earlier."

"But Mom-"

"No buts!"
The blue hedgehog pouted, and then Maddie got up and took a flashlight from the counter. "Speaking of, I want to check and make sure you don't have a concussion from that hit, Rouge."

The bat frowned, but didn't argue as she shone the light into her eyes. "We still need to hurry, Shadow's leg's injured so he can't run, and he's been having these moments where he forgets where and *who* he is. I'm worried that was what happened back at your house and that's what caused him to bolt."

"I'm betting Ozzie didn't help things either." Allison hummed.

"How are we supposed to find him?" Sonic asked, "Stone might have him anywhere by now and that was hours ago!"

"That's what I was going to tell you." Rouge replied, wincing a bit as Maddie shone the light into her left ear. "I uh... I can *hear things*."

Sonic leaned over the edge of the table, "Hear things like... *voices? Can you see dead people?*"

"Wow. Take it down a notch, Chuck Norris."

"It was *Bruce Willis!*"

"Same thing."

"*Is not!* You don't get to disrespect classics like the *Sixth Sense*-"

"Kids, please." Allison groaned, "Continue, Rouge."

Rouge sighed, "I mean, I can hear things that happened a long time ago... Like, I could come back into this room hours from now and hear this conversation all over again. It's like... like the voices are baked into the walls of places and I can draw them out later."

"So..."

"So, if I go back to your house, I can listen and figure out where Shadow went after he left your house last night."

Maddie looked back to Allison, who gave her the same uncomfortable look. "...Okay, but Silver and Blaze, you stay here with Allison. Sonic, Rouge and I will head back to the house and see what we can find."

"Sounds like a plan."
Rouge looked out towards the hall, "We need to hurry... Who knows what Shadow's going through right now."

Chapter End Notes

Rouge is okay! ...Also, I gave her a power XD Auditory Retrocognition

I also randomly woke up at 4 AM, decided to post this, and am now going back to bed XD

Chapter 16: Diverted Attention

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Agent Tower checked his watch and groaned.

His first day in Green Hills, he hadn't been able to unload even one box of his belongings at his new apartment yet, but had already engaged with the Wachowskis multiple times, found another alien, got that alien to the hospital, uncovered possible signs of yet another Robotnik threat to the supposedly *'sleepy'* Montana town, and told multiple hunters on his way back out of town to keep out of the woods, getting some threatening looks and clicks of gun safeties in response.

Oh, and it was *barely noon.*

He parked his truck at one of the nearby scenic views, climbing out once more to investigate the area. Looking back into the trees, endless trunks and branches lining the road and leading back into darkness, it wasn't too hard to be reminded of the state's tourist slogan. *'Get Lost in Montana,' indeed...*

The conversation he'd had with the eldest and second-youngest Wachowski boys about what they'd seen had been both enlightening and confusing. What they had witnessed was a young hedgehog- the same as Sonic and Obsidian, apparently- living on board the space station known as Space Colony Ark, and befriending a teenage girl by the name of Maria. The name Robotnik had been mentioned and a man seen who belonged to that name. The station was then attacked by armed forces, who seemed out to take Shadow. Professor Robotnik, Maria, and presumably others all perished, and Shadow was captured.

This was *way* more than anything Tower could have dreamed to get from his superiors or his own grandfather. He'd known that Project Shadow was locked away after an incident, and that most- if not *all*- information had been scrubbed and sealed to prevent anyone from getting access.

Obviously, that hadn't worked, seeing as someone had managed to find out about it and gone in to collect the imprisoned individual. However, the incident in question had always been implied to be *caused* by Project Shadow- aggressive behavior that led to their sealing, not an unprompted attack that- by the accounts of the fox and echidna- Shadow had not even shown any form of physical *defense* to, instead running for his life.

Of course the government would cover up that sort of thing. If the combat boot fits...

...But also, if Shadow was a *hedgehog*... was he really a science experiment to begin with-?

"Agent Tower!"

Tower paused in his thoughts as he heard a voice holler from down the street, and he groaned as he recognized it. "...Agent Faraday! What a surprise..."

"Surprise is right!" The larger agent marched up to him, his brows furrowed so deep his eyes were almost hidden. He was trying *so hard* to look official and important. "What are you *doing* here!?"

"Here in Green Hills, or here on..." He looked past the man to look at the street sign, "*...Seventh Avenue?*"

"You think this is a game, Abraham? We have a dangerous experiment roaming around!"

Tower rolled his eyes, Faraday was definitely very glad to be actually out on a mission and not sitting on stand-by. The two hadn't been exactly friends back in training camp, but they were on decent terms at least.
"Fine... I'm here because our superiors have assigned me to act as a long-term observer of Green Hills' local extraterrestrials. I arrived here just hours before you and your troops did."

"You are stationed here to observe their behavior? Why *you?*"

Tower shrugged, "It was my idea?"

"Hmph...Commander's Pet."

"Pssh." Tower was probably the *furthest* from being Commander Walters' pet right now, not after ratting him out. "How's it going out there, by the way?"

"Ugh. The reports were right. This thing can obviously *teleport.* We thought we had it multiple times, but then it just disappears for a second and reappears miles away. We thought it was pinned down about four miles east of here, but *this* place..." He gestured to the town and surrounding area, "The whole place is *radiating* the energy now. We can't get a good reading of where it is... Why do *you* care?"

"Because *I've* spent the last several hours since I got here trying to keep the townsfolk out of the woods and out of your hair, and that *includes* the new ones I was sent to observe. The sooner the hunters can go back out to their deer stands, the sooner they'll stop threatening to make me their next target on the wall."

"Yeesh. Glad *I'm* not on crowd-control."

"I'm sure you are..."
Tower turned back towards the woods, "You'd probably best get back to work before Colby sees you lollygagging and kicking rocks with me."

"Ergh... Right. Dude, you have no idea how hard it is to find something in these woods when you don't actually know what to *look for*..."

Tower nodded as the man left once more, "I may have *some* idea..." He mumbled under his breath.

These other officers were out looking for a *monster...* when all they might be chasing was a scared little kid.

Shadow was starting to wonder if these agents were *actually* government agents, or a group of Bigfoot hunters who tricked their way into the woods by *pretending* to be government agents.

There appeared to be very little direction to their search, wandering about aimlessly and shoving bushes aside with the ends of their weapons to search underneath it. Every so often, one would claim to have found something, only to be told that it was just a bear or cougar print.

Bears were in these woods. Great. Hopefully Shadow hadn't hijacked one of their dens.

Once the initial sounds of the humans' presence had waned, Shadow dared creep out of the dark cave and out into the cold, snowy surroundings of the woods. He wished he had Rouge's snowy-white fur right now, it would make it easier to blend in. He'd slipped the teleportation stone back into his shoe and then crawled along through the trees, keeping an ear and eye out for any of the agents. Fortunately, their uniforms were darkly-colored too, so any time that one came into view, he would duck down and remain as still as possible.

He hated the feeling of being hunted, but he just had to get out of the woods and back towards town. That blue hedgehog he'd seen might be able to help, he might be able to convince him that they were the same... perhaps they *were.* If humans had been able to make *him,* who was to say that they didn't make *more?* Perhaps the blue hedgehog was another escaped experiment, like himself. The fact that he kept having visions of him turning gold and calling Shadow's name had to mean *something...*

...He set aside asking that question for now. He needed to *get* there *first.*

He *couldn't* go back to Stone. He had no idea what might happen if Stone found out he'd bailed on *'Mission: Master Emerald.'* He needed to find Rouge, he needed to find somewhere safe and warm, and he needed to hunker down until these agents left.

Didn't Stone say they were able to track him? They weren't doing a very good job. Then again, the mysterious voice had said that they would hide him... Was he completely invisible? Could he get up and walk without them noticing?

Best not to to test that theory, not with his leg.

He heard a twig snap somewhere nearby, and he dropped down into the snow. It was freezing, but he was too nervous to move, and the chill lessened the pain in his leg. His ears swiveled, listening for further sound... silence.

No sound, but he could feel someone else was there. Did he dare move? *Please let it be Rouge, please let it be Rouge, please-*

"HEY!"

Shadow dropped to the ground as he heard the shout, covering his head with his hands. He saw a man dressed in plaid and with a white beard approach... but then walk right past, a shotgun in hand.

"What in tarnation are you hooligans doin' on my property!?"

More human voices began to speak from a distance, and Shadow gave a sigh of relief. The man hadn't noticed him, and was presently distracted by the agents wandering around. They might all be too distracted to notice if he made a break for it.

He felt the stone thrumming in his hand under his glove, and he wrapped his fingers around it and closed his eyes. *Okay, take me somewhere safe! I don't care where! Just somewhere safer than here!*

The stone hummed again, and Shadow gasped as he felt the snow disappear from underneath him. For a moment, all was silent, peaceful, and dark... and then it all crashed back down as he fell once more. Snow crunched underneath him again as he tumbled down a steep slope, and despite the pain it brought to do so, Shadow grabbed his feet, and tucked his arms and head in to protect them from damage.

The problem that stood was that *now* he had curled into a ball, and balls *rolled,* and when a ball rolls downhill... it tends to roll *faster* the *further* it goes. He had no control over direction, speed, or a way to stop as he picked up speed. Golden sparks crackled over his quills, and then he slammed into something hard.

The sparks exploded outward, and Shadow heard a loud, thunderous boom echo out across the woods. He unfurled just in time to see what he'd hit was the thick trunk of a massive tree, a tree which was now falling forward. It crashed to the ground, and then there was a low rumbling from all around, and Shadow gasped as the snow around him started to slide down the steep slope, taking him with it.

...Well dang, so much for sneakily getting away, he'd just started a *snow flood!*

"Why couldn't I *run* home, Mom? That would've been *faster.*"

"Because we're supposed to be laying low right now, Baby. We can't be doing anything that will tick off Walters as long as his goons are walking around."

Sonic grumbled as he sat in the front seat of his mom's car. Riding shotgun was fun, but not when all he wanted was to get home and start trying to use Rouge's *'Past-Hearing'* power to track Shadow's location. Maybe if they could get to him first, then they could take him home, prove he wasn't a problem, and the government guys would let him stay!...

...Yeah, it sounded even less plausible when he actually put the hope into words.

Rouge was sitting in the back seat, now wearing a giant sweatshirt that was over-sized even for *Maddie* to keep warm as they drove. The bat could pull her entire body inside the fabric without stretching it, and she almost *was*- it was the best they could do in the heat of the moment to keep her warm and out of hibernation relapse. Her arms were crossed as she looked out the window, her big ears folded back against her head.

Maddie gave a bat a quick glance in the rear-view window, "Don't worry, I'm sure if they'd found Shadow, we'd have heard about it already."

"I know... But he's only been out of that capsule a few days, and-"

"MOM BRAKE!"

Sonic gripped his seat belt as his mom looked ahead again, seeing that as they approached some cliffs where the road had been carved out of the mountain, an avalanche was crashing over the edge of the cliffs to their right. Maddie's foot shoved the brake pedal to the floor, but the little bit of ice on the road kept her from stopping completely, and they skidded. "Hold on, kids!" She hollered.

The car jerked as it hit the drifts forming in the road, and then Sonic put his hands over his head as he heard and felt the *thump, thump, thump* of snow continuing to pile down on top of and around the car. After a few seconds, the thumping faded, and he lifted his head and opened his eyes again.

The passenger side of the car was completely enveloped in snow, darkening that side of the car, and on the driver's side, the snow hadn't reached the windows, but it was still plenty high enough to keep the doors from opening.

"Ev...Everyone *okay...?*" Maddie gasped as she looked around.

"Uh huh...!" Sonic responded, and Rouge nodded, her cheeks almost as pale as her fur from fright. "*You* okay, Mom?"

Maddie nodded, and then turned off the engine. "Okay, we're just gonna sit here a minute. Okay? I'm gonna call your dad and let him know what happened so he can come dig us out."

"How long will *that* take?" Rouge worried.

"I'm sure with Knuckles helping, not long. Just sit tight."

Rouge nodded slowly, and then looked back out the window. After a moment, she gasped. "Up there!"

Sonic leaned over the center console to look where she was pointing. Up on top of the cliffs where the avalanche had originated, they could see sparks of yellow.

"*Shadow* gives off sparks like that!"

Sonic nodded, "Mom, let me out the window. I can get to him fastest!"

"Sonic-"

"*Please, Mama...!*"

Maddie groaned, she hated when Sonic used the *'Mama'* card. "...Okay, but be careful."

She turned the car on just enough to open the window, and then Sonic took off out the window before she closed it again and turned the engine off again.

Rouge ducked deeper into the sweatshirt, "Do you think he'll get to him okay?"

Maddie shook her head, "I would be surprised if *anyone* can outrun that boy..."

Chapter End Notes

Another chapter for y'all!

Shadow's not having the best luck out in the snow, but Sonic's on the way!

Chapter 17: Shocked

Knuckles' head tilted from his handwriting practice as the phone rang, and then resumed as Tails went to answer it.

"Wachowski residence... *Dad!*"

Knuckles was concerned now as he once again paused, what would their father be calling home about? He'd only been away for perhaps an hour.

Following everything else, the man of the house had left the three remaining members of the household alone to head into town and try to keep the peace as he always did. The sudden presence of GUN outside of town was surely to disturb some of that peace, and as the sheriff, it was his job to calm the masses... as best he could, at least.

"Y-Yeah yeah yeah, hold on." Tails looked to the echidna, "He wants to talk to *you,* Knuckles."

Knuckles was up onto his feet and marched over, taking the phone. "I am here, Father."

Great. Look, I just got a phone call from your mom. She's in Pattern Pass between town and home and an avalanche has her car pinned down.

"Is she *wounded?*"

No, she's fine. But it's gonna take me longer to get out there, so I want you to head out and start digging her car out for me. I'll be there as soon as I can.

"Of course. I will leave immediately."

Knew I could count on you, big guy.

"Always."
Knuckles hung up the phone, and then turned to Tails. "Mother's vehicle has been disabled. I am going to aid her. While I am gone-" He placed his hands on Tails' shoulders, squeezing them gently. "-*You* Tails, are the eldest of the house. I entrust you with the task of protecting Obsidian from harm."

Tails nodded, "If anybody we don't know shows up, I'll use a ring to take Obsidian to safety."

Knuckles placed a hand on the fox's shoulder, "You are a brave warrior... I shall return shortly." He then turned to Obsidian, "Little Warrior..." His brows furrowed as he pointed firmly at the toddler, "Do *not* perform intentional acts to make the fox's task *harder.* Understood?"

Obsidian looked back at him, half of a block shoved in his mouth as he gnawed on it.

"Good."

"Knuckles..."
Tails caught the echidna as he headed for the door. The fox's brows furrowed a bit, "Do you... really think that Obsidian *understands* everything you tell him?"

The eldest gave a firm nod, "I do..." He replied, and then hurried out the front door.

Tails rolled his eyes and then walked over, lying down on the floor next to the tiny hedgehog. "Who is he kidding? You're one of the cutest, sweetest babies I've ever seen. How much trouble could you be?... Actually, my monkey wrench is still missing, so there's that."

Obsidian giggled, bonking Tails on the head with his slobber-covered block. "Ails! Ails!"

"Yup!" Tails caught the block with a grin, "It's Ails and Obbie today! While the parents and Big Bros are away, the kids will play!" He scooped up the toddler, "Say, you wanna see some of my new invention plans? It probably won't make much sense to you, but maybe going over them with you will help me work out the kinks-"

...Crunch...crunch...crunch- *"GASP!"*

Shadow coughed and gasped for air as his head popped free of the snow, shaking the frozen substance from his fur and quills. It was fortunate that he had stayed near the top of the flood, because it still took him some time to dig his way out to the open air and oxygen above it. Curling into a ball had helped keep him from getting hurt, but even as he pulled himself loose from the tiny hole he'd made, his quills still danced with electricity, sending it bounding along the top of the snow like little balls of light.

Whether it was the sound or the sight of the snow itself, there was little chance that nobody noticed what he'd done. He needed to get out of there, he needed to get to safety again.

He took another step and then stifled a yelp as his foot sank into the snow, knocking him back down to the ground. It crumpled out from under him, and he groaned. Walking might not be quite the best way to travel one-legged.

His ears pricked as he heard a sound, and then he looked back to see a burst of blue coming from the direction the snow had been going. It came to a stop, revealing the blue hedgehog, sparks of his own popping off of him like a faulty wire.

Oh no. I buried him too and now he's coming for me!

The hedgehog scanned the area, and then his eyes found the wounded hedgehog. "There you are!"

Shadow gasped, and then the stone thrummed again and he was gone. Then he was back, crashing back into the snow. "Ah-! Ow...!"

"Aha!"
Shadow gasped as he saw the hedgehog was still a fair distance away, but he was coming

again. Shadow's quills sparked, it was giving him away! *No! Take me further away! He begged the stone.*

Another thrum, and Shadow was prepared this time. When he dropped back out into reality again, he landed on his feet- rather clumsily and his left leg complained for it, but still on his feet. The hedgehog was out of sight now, but now Shadow's head was beginning to hurt too. He limped a few steps and then ducked behind a tree, putting a hand to his head. "Ah...! This isn't working very well...!" He hissed. "Rouge, where are you...? I could use the help-"

"Marco!"
Shadow froze as he heard the hedgehog's voice again, getting closer. How was he so good at *finding him!?* The crunch of the snow under his feet told him he was approaching. "...You're supposed to say *'Polo'* so I can find you!... Your lightning works *too."*

"Shoot!" Shadow hissed, and then disappeared again just as the hedgehog's face appeared to his side.

Shadow grunted as he fell again, but this time, he didn't have the strength to get up and run. He crumpled into the snow behind a large fallen tree, the snow giving a soft crunch. He gasped for air, his arms and legs trembling, but not from the cold. He tried to roll over, but his head was beginning to spin.

Note to self: don't use the teleportation stone too many times in a row...! He thought, feeling the stone still thrumming, but even *it* seemed a little worn out.

The golden sparks still crackled across his quills, he couldn't stop them, and they were still a dead-giveaway to his location. He heard the low hum of his pursuer approaching, and he did the only thing he could think of... he curled up into a tight ball, quills sticking out in all directions. This was what hedgehogs did for protection, right? But did it work against *other hedgehogs?*

The hum stopped, and then he heard the other hedgehog's voice. "Aww... Don't tell me after all this, you just *give up!"*

"Please...!" Shadow hissed, "J-Just leave me alone...! I didn't *mean* to-"

"Hey, I was only *chasing* cuz you were *running.* I'm not gonna-"

Crack!

Shadow gasped as the ground below him, which he thought was solid, suddenly gave way as the sheet of displaced snow broke away. He started to free-fall into the hole, and then he heard a yelp and the other hedgehog tried to *catch him...* by grabbing his bad leg.

The golden sparks exploded out as the pain shot through and Shadow screamed, and then the blue hedgehog gave a cry of pain as well. Shadow saw through tear-filled eyes as the hedgehog's quills flickered gold as one of the sparks hit him, his teeth tightly clenched and eyes wide in shock, and then an explosion of his own blue energy burst out from him before he slumped, and both of them tumbled into the hole and the dark.

Knuckles rushed down the road, a flash of glowing red passing around cars and other runners on the road. He had to admit that the humans had bravery to be out for a run in this cold weather, they didn't even have the fur he did, and he could feel the chill creeping through his limbs.

Finding the scene of the incident wasn't too hard. In fact, it wasn't too far from where he himself had crashed Deputy Wade's car after pursuing his brothers when they fled from him when they first met. Yes, a good chase that had been.

The road was completely blocked off by the avalanche's fall, and already Knuckles could see other vehicles had stopped and the townsfolk were working to clear some of it away.

The echidna searched the area until he caught sight of his mother's car, mostly buried in the snow. *"Mother!"* He hollered, rushing to the side that wasn't fully submerged. His hands pressed against the glass, and was relieved to see his mother's smiling face on the other side. "Mother, are you harmed?"

"I'm fine, sweetie." His mother informed, "We *both* are."

Knuckles looked into the back seat, seeing a bat from their world nestled in the seat who waved from underneath an oversized sweatshirt. Knuckles nodded to her, and then looked to the snow. "Fear not, I will have you freed in moments!"

"Just mind the other drivers, okay, baby?"

Knuckles looked to the other drivers with their shovels, and nodded. No throwing snow haphazardly, he needed to be precise. "Understood."

He began to dig, hauling large clumps of snow aside first from the driver's side of the car, and then making his way around the back side of the car. He heard his mother and the bat engaging in quiet conversation from inside, and wondered about her. Where had she come from? Was she involved in the break-in this morning? Was she a friend of Shadow's? She wasn't the girl from the vision, but the echidna hoped that she was just as kind-

Knuckles paused as he heard a low crackle, and then looked up to see a bright blue pulse of light washing over the trees and then flaring out over the top of the cliff before dissipating. "Sonic...!"

For a moment, he fought whether to keep digging or go to check on his brother. "...Sonic is a warrior." He whispered, "He will be able to protect himself until I can reach him. Mother is frail in form but strong in spirit, her safety comes first..."

Chapter 18: Two Hedgehogs in a Hole

"Ugh..."
Sonic's head was pounding as his surroundings began to change. The empty, silent darkness was now a cooler, damp feeling, though the darkness didn't really change. "What *happened...?*"

He tried to remember... The avalanche... He'd gone after Shadow... He started to fall and Sonic caught him, but then... then Shadow had hit him with some bolt of energy. Sonic had never been struck by actual lightning, but it certainly had felt how he'd *imagine* being struck would feel.

It had also felt kind of like when he'd taken in the energy of the Chaos Emeralds, but rather than a sudden rush of energy and power, it was like the energy had punched him in the gut, and then set him ablaze from the inside out. His arms and legs burned, his head had snapped back, and the last thing Sonic remembered before the darkness was staring up at the sky as he felt one of his own jolts fire up and out... Another EMP blast.

It hadn't been intentional, he knew that much. Shadow had released it as a *reaction,* but man, did it hurt...

"S-Shadow...?" He moaned, rubbing his head. His eyes blinked repeatedly, but the darkness didn't fade any. Shadow had been falling, and if Sonic had passed out from the hit, then they probably both fell into the hole they'd uncovered. He looked up, but not seeing the hole they'd fallen through. How *far* had they fallen? "Shadow, Shadow are you here?"

Then it appeared again, the soft crackling of golden sparks, dancing across the floor. Shadow's dark fur blended in with the rest of their surroundings, but the sparks lit up his streaks just enough that Sonic could see he was once more curled up into a ball.

"Are you okay?" He asked softly, crawling towards him slowly. The ground below them felt like cool soil, so they must've just fallen into another small cave like the one he'd used for a home when he first arrived.

"I'm sorry..."
Shadow's voice was hoarse, as if he'd been crying. "I-I'm sorry...! I didn't mean... I wasn't-"

"Hey..." Sonic winced as he pulled himself a little closer. "It's okay... I know you didn't mean to... Did *I* hurt *you*...?"

Shadow didn't respond, other than curling up a bit tighter. The golden sparks continued to glimmer, pulsing almost like they were mimicking his heart beat. "...You're... *not mad?*" He finally whispered.

"Mad? Why would I be mad?"

Shadow unfolded enough to expose his eyes, which were also flickering gold, "Are you joshing? I caused a massive wave of snow to go sliding towards your home, why *wouldn't* you be mad!?"

"But you didn't *mean to,* right?"

"Well... *No,* but-"

"So, then we're cool. Avalanches happen all the time, nobody was gonna just *assume* it was *you.*"

Shadow uncurled a little bit more, and Sonic smiled a bit. Good, he was getting through to him...
"How... How can you forgive me so *easily?"*

"Eh, grudges aren't really my thing. That's more Eggman's thing."

"Eggman?"

"Yeah... Rouge mentioned you guys had run into Stone earlier-"

"You talked with *Rouge!?*"
Shadow unfolded entirely, leaning closer to Sonic with wide eyes. "Is she okay? Where *is* she? She's not super mad at me, is she? I didn't mean to ditch her, it was an *accident!* I-"

"Hey, whoa whoa whoa!" Sonic beamed, "Your mouth's running faster then *mine,* and that's *impressive!"*

Shadow winced, "Sorry, I just... Ugh!" He shook his head, "I have so many questions and no answers, and I just... I don't know what to do."

"Well, I can help. Rouge got away from Stone too, and we helped her. She also told us you were out here all by yourself, so I came up here to find you and make sure you were okay. She said you were hurt."

Shadow sighed, gingerly rubbing his left leg. "Yeah... My leg's all messed up. Hurts to walk on it much."

"You were doing pretty good at running away from me earlier."

"Sorry, I..."
He reached into his shoe, and then opened his hand to reveal a glinting white stone in his hand. "I was using this to try and get away, but I thought you were *mad,* and I don't wanna have to *fight* anybody, so-"

"*Whoa...!*"
Sonic reached out and fingered the stone, "Where'd you find a *Chaos Emerald?*"

"A what?"

"That's what these *are."* Sonic held out his hand, and after a moment's hesitation, Shadow handed it to him. The stone's glow ignited the space around them, and Sonic could see they were in a small cave that was much longer than it was wide or tall, more likely part of some tunnel. Overhead, the hole they'd fallen through was visible, but covered up by snow once more.
His attention moved back to the emerald, "There are seven of them. They're powerful stones that came from my homeworld-"

"Homeworld? So you're *not* another experiment like *me?*"

"Hmm? Oh no, I'm an alien from another planet... Wait, does that mean *you're* an alien *too?* I mean, we *do* look a lot alike."

Shadow's eyes widened, and then he sat back. "I...I don't know... What's your *name,* alien hedgehog?"

Sonic grinned, smacking his forehead. "Duh! Sorry, I should have started with that... I'm Sonic. Sonic Wachowski!"

"Sonic Wachowski... the last name doesn't sound very alien."

"Oh, well that's because I was adopted by a human family! Yup, Tom and Maddie Wachowski, aka the Donut Lord and Pretzel Lady."

"You call them that?"

"Eh, sometimes. Mostly just Mom and Dad."

Shadow curled up a little bit again, "...Wish I had a mom and dad... Sounds like I don't really have *anybody...*"

Sonic sighed, "Yeah... I didn't either for a long time... My guardian, Longclaw, she was killed when I was little by some guys who wanted to use me for their own plans."

Shadow looked back, "...Sounds like we're not so different, then... Except *you* found people who took you in... *Good people,* at least... There's this guy-"

"Stone. Rouge told me. But don't worry, I won't let him hurt ya. I'm kinda the local hero, you know."

"You... You are?"

"Uh huh!" Sonic put an arm around Shadow, "Don't you worry. Between the two of us, we can do anything!"

"Well, I'm glad *you're* enthusiastic." Shadow shook his head, "I'll save my excitement for when I know this is actually going to *work.*"

"You don't trust me?"

"I literally just *met* you. Don't try to make promises you're not going to be able to keep, Sonic Wachowski..."

Sonic pouted a bit, this hedgehog certainly was a downer. "Okay, okay... Look, how about this? We get you back to my house? My mom and Rouge were already headed there. You can rest, my mom can look at your leg and figure out what's wrong- Did I mention my mom's a *doctor?* I could've sworn I *did*- and then we can figure out what to do after that."

"Won't that get you and your family in trouble with the law?"

"Pssh. My dad's the sheriff of Green Hills, he *is* the law!"

Shadow's ears pricked a bit, and then he looked thoughtfully at his hands. After a moment, he gently folded his hands into fists, returning the stone to his glove and then nodding. "...Okay, but we have to be careful not to let the agents or Stone see us."

Sonic beamed, "Careful is my middle name!"

"Really?"

"Erm... No, not really."
He got up onto his feet, offering a hand to Shadow. "Now don't crush it like my brother Knuckles did, okay?"

"Okay...?"
Shadow took his hand and gripped it tightly to allow Sonic to pull him up onto his good leg. "Okay, step one is finding a way out of this hole-"

There was then a loud crunch, and the hedgehogs jumped back as part of the ceiling came crashing down. Shadow grabbed tightly onto Sonic to keep upright as light flooded the cave, and then both of them looked up as they could see a big, metallic shape looming over their hiding place.

"*Not* what I had in mind...!" Shadow hissed.

Sonic looked around, finding that with the increased level of light, he could see down the tunnel a lot more. He looked to Shadow's hand, where the Chaos Emerald lay hidden under his glove, and then grinned. He just needed to get to the lake. "...I've got an idea. Hold on!"

"What? H-Hey!" Shadow wrapped his arms around Sonic's neck to hold on as Sonic swung him up into carrying him bridal-style. "Sonic-"

Sonic saw the giant robot's hand reaching down, and his quills sparked. "We gotta go *fast...!*"

The dark hedgehog's own quills began to spark a bit as he held on tighter and they took off in a gust of air.

"*Son-iiiiiic!*"

Between the civilians and Knuckles, Pattern Pass was back to passable once more quite quickly.

Knuckles sat in the front seat as Maddie hurried home, and then hopped out before the car was fully in the drive. "Tails, I have returned with Mother and a visitor!" He announced as he marched up to the door.

After a moment, Tails appeared at the door. "Oh, hi Knuckles. Welcome back... You said a visitor?"

Knuckles nodded, turning back to the car as their mother got out and then helped a white bat out of the back seat. "Her name is Rouge. She tells us that she is a companion of Shadow's."

"So he's okay? Where is he?"

"Out in the woods. Sonic has once again left us here to go in search, but this time, I fear he may have run into trouble."

Tails nodded, "Yeah... I saw the power flicker for a second. Do you think he's hurt?"

"I do not know what has transpired, but I hope that both he and Shadow are unharmed."

Maddie guided the bat inside as Tails opened the door a bit wider, "There we go... Thank you, Tails."

"You're welcome, Mom." Tails waved to the bat, "Hello, my name is Miles, but my family calls me Tails."

"Rouge..." The bat rubbed her arms as she looked around, "...Feels weird to be inside a house, and..." Her ears twitched and little wisps of green appeared around them for a moment. "...It sounds like it's seen some action... *Explosions.*"

"Oh gee..." Tails rubbed the back of his head, "You could tell from looking at it?"

"Rouge can hear the history of places she's in." Maddie informed, "And yes, this house has seen some... *unusual activity.*" She looked around, "Where's Obsidian, Tails?"

"I got him down for a nap about fifteen minutes ago. He and Ducky are both tucked in."

The woman smiled, holding out a hand for a high-five. "Nicely done. Way to go minding the house, big bro!"

Tails giggled as he gave his mom a high-five, and then looked back to Knuckles and Rouge. "So now what? We still can't go out into the woods to help Sonic, right?"

Knuckles shook his head, "It is too risky... I can only hope that the hedgehog can get both of them back here to safety shortly..."

"Ugh!" Rouge grumbled, "I should be out there *helping!* This is all my fault, if I hadn't agreed to let him go with Stone, he wouldn't-"

"Hey hey hey..."
Maddie bent down to the bat, putting a hand on her shoulder. "This whole thing is... messy. I trust Sonic, he'll keep Shadow safe."

"And I'm sure our dad's on his way out there to help him right now!" Tails announced, "He's really good at punching government agents!"

Rouge raised a brow, and Maddie groaned, putting her hand to her face and rubbing her eyes. "Unfortunately, he is... For now," She stood up straight again, "Are you hungry? We have plenty of snacks around here."

"Is it *non-expired* food and not lattes with goat milk?"

"Uh... Yeah?"

"Then I'll take you up on that."

Chapter 19: Lakeside Chase

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Sonic had said they were going to go fast, he wasn't kidding.

Shadow grasped tightly to Sonic's neck and shoulders as they flew through the tunnels, wind gusting by them and whipping through his quills. It was dark, but Sonic seemed to know where he was going despite that- was that a hedgehog thing? Could *he* learn to navigate underground this efficiently?

Unfortunately, he could hear the robot pursuing them from above, the crunching and cracking as it punched hole after hole in the ceiling.

"It's gonna cause a cave-in at this rate!"

"I think that's the idea!" Sonic informed, "Just hold on, we just have to get out of the tunnels and back onto the surface."

"Where exactly are we *going!?"*

"To the lake. Once we're out of the tunnels, I'll have room to- *WHOA!*"

Shadow gasped as the roof in front of them began to crumble, and then he clenched his fist around the Chaos Emerald. It thrummed and they were gone, before crashing back out onto the snow. Shadow curled up into a ball as Sonic lost his grip on him, rolling through the frozen substance before coming to a stop. "Ugh... you okay?"

"Y-Yeah..." Sonic sat up, shaking the snow from his quills as well. "Thanks for the save."

"Yeah..." Shadow's limbs were shaking again, "Can't do that too many times in a row, though... wears me out...!"

Sonic looked up and gasped as they heard voices getting closer, and then the robot appeared over the horizon. It had to have stood at least a head taller than most humans Shadow had seen, broad in the shoulder and somewhat humanoid in shape. Its head had no true face, but just a furrowed browline, framing a pair of red, glowing eyes that would have been even more terrifying coming out of a cloud of smoke as it approached.

"Ope! Time to *go,* Shadz!"

Sonic scooped the dark hedgehog up again as the robot took aim, but then it turned its attention back to the agents as they approached. Shadow hoped the agents could handle what they were about to face. *Heh. Maybe they'll think that robot's Project Shadow... Then again, can they even prove that* I *am-*

Another sound of something big approaching made him turn, and his eyes widened as he saw another large robotic shape approaching... but this one wasn't so much a robot as it was a mecha, with Agent Stone as the driver.

"Sonic, leave me! This isn't your fight!"

"No way! We're almost at the treeline, just hold on tight!"

"But Sonic-!"

This hedgehog was much too stubborn to give up, and Shadow had to give him credit for that, but why was he putting himself at risk for Shadow's sake? He didn't hardly know him! What did he gain from this?

There was a loud pop, and then Sonic dodged a blast of hot energy that slammed into a nearby tree, knocking the snow and branches from its trunk.

"Whew! That was close!"

"Sonic, would you just listen to me for a second!?"

"Almost there, Shadow-"

"SONIC, STOP!"
Shadow's quills sparked again, and Sonic yelped as it hit him. He faltered just as they hit the treeline, tumbling across the snow and ice down the light slope before coming to a stop. Shadow winced as he rolled over onto his hands and knees, looking back towards Sonic as he too pulled himself up.

"Dude..." Sonic gave him a wince and a smirk, "You gotta find some way to calm your quills, huh? Ever tried *yoga...?* Ouch...!"

"S-Sorry... But I can't let you... let you do this...!"

The smirk faded, "Do what?"

"HELP ME!"
Shadow's quills burst off sparks that melted tiny holes in the snow. "Don't you get it? All of this is because of *me! I'm* the one they want, not *you!*"

Sonic shook snow off of himself, "Oh believe me, Shadow. Stone would be chasing me regardless. It's a long story, but we can save that for later. Now-"

"NO! Don't touch me!"
Shadow crawled away from the blue hedgehog, making him stop. "Don't help me! Go home, Sonic! I won't let you! Go home and live your life!"

Sonic groaned, scrubbing his face. "Come on, man! Why is letting people help you so *hard!?"*

"EVERYONE WHO HELPS ME DIES!"
Shadow's eyes widened as the words left his mouth, echoing off of the mountains and the ice covering the lake and then back into his ears. The trembling grew worse, his eyes growing hot as tears welled up in them, and then he punched the snow hard as he stifled a sob. "M-My...My sister!... All those innocent people! I-It's my fault... M-My fault...!"

He curled up a bit, pressing his head into the snow as he shook and fought back the tears and sobs. He flinched as he felt Sonic's hand touch his back, but didn't lift his head to look at him.

"Hey... What happened wasn't your fault. You didn't cause those guys to attack the ARK and hurt all those people."

Shadow's head popped up, "You... You *know* about it?"

Sonic nodded, "It's a really long story, but... we saw it in a vision."

"A vision...? Like the ones *I've* been-"
He gasped as another blast shot past them, and Sonic whipped around to face the mecha standing at the edge of the trees, Stone in the pilot's seat.

"Ah... There you two are." Stone sneered, "I was beginning to wonder if you were avoiding me."

"Sonic, go." Shadow whispered, "Don't worry about me-"

"Not happening." Sonic mumbled back to him, putting his fists up. "Look, Stone. What happened to Robotnik was his own fault! I would have given him the chance to surrender-"

"Surrender isn't the Robotnik way, I'm afraid...!" Stone hissed.

Shadow's ears pricked a bit, "I thought Stone said Robotnik was just away on a *trip."*

Sonic winced a bit, "Ah, no... I kinda... Used the Chaos Emeralds to stop him from blowing up the world and he got crushed by his own super mech."

"You see, Shadow? This maniac and his kind are not to be trusted." Stone murmured, "Violence is the only thing they know."

Shadow's brows furrowed, "*Bogus.* Sonic has done nothing but try to help me all day- though I can't imagine *why.* All *you* did was remind me of my sad backstory and ask me to *steal* from them!"

"Project-"

"No! I don't know who this *Project Shadow* is, or what he might have done to make you think he's a destructive killing machine! But..." Shadow tried to sit up a little straighter, teeth clenched as he tried to sound confident. "...But I am not *he. I...* am Shadow the Hedgehog."

A darkness seemed to cover the man's gaze, a rage that Shadow found all too familiar.
"...Fine then. We'll do this the hard way!"

Sonic snatched Shadow back up as the mech slammed its fist down, the blue hedgehog yelping as he skidded on the icy shore for a moment before catching his footing again. "S-Sonic-"

"We're okay, we're okay." Sonic reassured, "Just a little harder to get going on this ice. You still got the emerald?"

Shadow felt the stone humming under his glove, "Yes."

"Good, cuz we might need you to do that teleporting thing if this gets too intense."

"And go *where?* He'll just find us again."

"Just trust me, okay? It'll be fine!" Sonic hissed, "Man, do I wish I had *cleats on* right now...!"

Sonic was quick, but Shadow could tell that he wasn't hitting the speeds he had been earlier. The ice was slipping him up. "Can we cut across to the other side of the lake? Put some distance?"

"I-I dunno. I don't know how thick the ice is, and I have a feeling you can't swim *either...!"*

Shadow shook his head, "No, I'd guess not- *DUCK!"*

Sonic skidded as a fireball shot over their heads, and then Shadow yelped as his feet slipped up again. "No no no no no!"

Shadow released him as they hit the ice and then slid out onto the shallows of the lake itself. Shadow gasped as the fireball hit the surface of the lake and the ice shattered further out, leaving a massive hole to the waters below. "Oh no...!"

"I-It's okay, Shadow. I think we're okay here on the- *Gyah!"*

Shadow gasped as suddenly there was a giant robot hand reaching out and grabbing Sonic tightly, scooping him up into the air from the shore. "Sonic!"

Sonic squirmed as Agent Stone held him up to his face, "And I thought you were supposed to be *fast...!"*

"R-Run, Shadow!" Sonic hissed, "Find somewhere to hide! I'll be- *AUGH!"* Sonic threw his head back in a howl of pain as the robot's grip tightened, blue sparks dancing across his quills.

"Your choice, Project Shadow..."

Shadow looked to Sonic, and then to Stone. Sonic's eyes were welling with tears, teeth clenched in pain, but he still shook his head to Shadow. He then gave a sigh, and his shoulders slumped. He'd lost his family... he wouldn't let Sonic's family lose *him.*

He reached into his glove slowly, "Okay... You got me... *BUT NOT THE EMERALD!"*

Agent Stone dropped Sonic to the ground as Shadow threw the emerald out onto the ice covering the lake's surface. With its minuscule size and white coloring, it was invisible against the ice almost instantly, and the robot wouldn't be able to go out and search for it without surely falling through the ice into the frigid waters below. From where he laid, Shadow watched the tiny stone skid across the ice... before plunging into the icy waters below in the hole.

Shadow crawled over to beside Sonic, putting a hand on his shoulder. The hedgehog yelped, and Shadow could see his shoulder looked like it had popped out of the socket, and from the visible cracks in the ice where he'd landed, it was possible that it was *broken.* "I'm sorry-"

"D-Don't be...!" Sonic hissed, "Y-You did the right thing...!"

But now they were trapped. Shadow couldn't walk, and Sonic couldn't carry him with his arm injured. Agent Stone's mech loomed over them, and Shadow placed himself over Sonic in an attempt to guard him. "I know you're upset, but hurting Sonic and the others won't bring Robotnik back!"

"No..."
The robot's hand raised upwards over them, "But it will make me *feel* a lot better!"

Shadow wrapped himself around Sonic as the hand moved down, but then there was a bright flash of light and a warbling sound, and he looked back as the hand didn't make contact.

A dome of cyan energy enveloped the duo, which was now a *trio* as a third hedgehog, with fur a silvery color, blocked the blow. His hands glowed with the same cyan energy, and electricity of the same color pulsed across his quills in *rings* rather than outward like a faulty wire.

"Do...not... touch them!" He shouted.

"S-Silver, I thought you didn't want to get *grounded*...!" Sonic teased.

"Like I said," Silver hissed through gritted teeth, "You'd get yourself blown up if I don't keep an eye on you...!"

Shadow's eyes widened- for a split second, Silver's fur seemed to change color to a lighter, more pastel version of the gold he'd seen on Sonic, before reverting back. What were these visions? What did they mean?

Stone's robot took a step back, as if evaluating the situation. He clearly hadn't expected Silver to appear- had he even known that Silver *existed?* Was he *prepared* for this sort of thing?

"N-Nice work...!" Shadow stammered.

Silver gave a faint sigh, "You learn a few tricks blocking volcanic debris from hitting you...! But I can't keep this up *forever.* Got a plan, Sonic?"

Sonic winced as he tried to sit up, "T-The hole in the ice... I-If we can get Kaia's attention...maybe-"

Another swing, this time both hands came crashing down on the shield. Silver grunted, dropping to one knee and his arms quivering. "B-Better figure out how to do that fast...!" He hissed as the hands raised up again, "I-I can't take many more hits like this...!"

"And neither can the ice...!" Shadow hissed.

Stone seemed to know it too, giving a grin. "That's a nifty trick, but I'll bet it takes a lot of focus..."

Silver hissed, and then gasped as he saw more projectiles appeared and then fired. They missed the shield, but instead slammed into some nearby trees along the water's edge. The trunks splintered, and then began to tumble.

Stone's mech was raising its hands again, the trees were falling towards them from the other side. Shadow felt the sparks dancing across his quills again... He couldn't believe he was about to do this. He grabbed onto Silver's ankle, and a bolt of the energy shot up into the silvery hedgehog.

Silver yelped in pain, and the shield exploded out in all directions. Shadow held onto Silver as the jolts continued, and then let go. Silver dropped into the snow, giving a soft moan as his shield faded out. Shadow looked out past the crater of ice all around them, which rose up as if shattered and then refrozen into shape; the trees were knocked backwards in the other direction and the snow had been knocked from the treetops around. Stone's mech was down- no, Stone's mech was *gone.*

Whatever Shadow had done to augment Silver's power had split the mech into pieces. Not separating limbs from the torso, but separating metal from wiring, glass from alloy, and weapons from their holsters. The robot had been dismantled piece-by-piece in one quick motion, without actually damaging the material itself.

"*Damn...!*" He whispered to himself.

Silver sat up, eyes wide with both shock and maybe a little anger. "...What in Pele's Crown was *that!?*" He shouted.

"Sorry...!" Shadow whimpered, "I panicked and it worked with Sonic earlier, so-"

"*Dude.*" Sonic sat up with a pained smirk, "Thanks for the help, but seriously. You gotta give us *warning* before you make us explode with that... whatever you keep doing to us."

Silver looked at the mech, and then gasped. "By the gods, I didn't do that to *Stone,* did I!?"

Fortunately, he had *not.* The man was laying in the pile of robot parts, dazed, but not out entirely. More footsteps in the snow told them others were coming, and Shadow slumped against Sonic and Silver joined him as humans in uniform appeared over the ridge, the man Shadow assumed was Sonic's dad included.

"Hands in the air!" He shouted, slowly making his way towards the scene, alongside two others.

"Agent Stone..." One of the others hummed, "...Nice work, boys."

"*Thanks...?*" Shadow murmured.

Sonic's dad looked out towards the rest of the woods, "Can you three make it back to the house? We'll figure this out later."

Silver got up onto his feet, wincing a bit as his quills flickered cyan again. "I can get them there...! Come on, guys... We'd better hurry though, I feel a headache coming..."

Chapter End Notes

Team Triple-S to the rescue! Now to get away before the REAL agents show up...

Chapter 20: Crashing on the Couch

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Maddie hadn't been expecting the back door to open, but even less to see Silver limping his way inside, supporting a dark hedgehog on one side and Sonic on the other. *"Boys!"*

"H-Hi, Miss... M-Miss Maddie...!" Silver mumbled, his feet beginning to drag and his eyes beginning to roll back.

"By the gods-"
Knuckles rushed forward and caught Silver as he collapsed, Sonic and the other hedgehog catching themselves on the back of the couch. "Silver, are you *wounded?* I do not see blood, is it *internal?* Your sister will have my head if you are harmed!"

Silver blinked, staring blankly up at the ceiling. "I... I just need to... Oh, I feel *nauseous*...!"

"I'll get a bucket!" Tails announced, hurrying to the kitchen.

Maddie overlooked the trio as she closed the back door behind them. Silver was swallowing hard to keep from vomiting on their floor, Sonic's left arm was limp at his side and clearly out of the socket at the shoulder, and the third... It must have been Shadow. Black with red streaks, he almost looked like how she'd imagine Obsidian to look as a teenager, if not for the red versus blue. He looked fatigued, and- like Rouge had mentioned- he was favoring his left leg, barely putting any weight on it.

"H-Hi, Mom..." Sonic sighed, limping around the couch and then collapsing onto the cushions. He yelped as his arm moved, grasping it with his good arm. "Augh...!"

"What in the world happened out there!?"

"Stone... Mech... Silver totaled it... Dad, Wade, and Tower are handling it. Told us to come home."

"Well I should hope so!"

Shadow hobbled his way around to the floor beside the couch, carefully sitting down and hiding behind it just a little. "Help them first, Ma'am... I can wait."

Maddie smiled, "Okay, sweetie. Just sit tight, okay?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

Honestly, if Shadow was this polite, how could he possibly be the dangerous monster the government had been making him out to be?

Tails returned to Silver as Knuckles helped him over into the center of the living room, handing him the bucket just in time for him to throw up into it. "Ugh. *Gross...!*"

"S-Sorry... H-Head's killing me...! Light's so... too bright...!"

"Sounds like you've got a nasty migraine coming on, kiddo. Tails, grab the ibuprofen from the medicine cabinet."

Tails was on the job again, and Knuckles offered a blanket to Silver as he began to shiver.

With the echidna tending to Silver and Shadow appearing to be mostly unharmed, Maddie turned her attention to Sonic. "What happened to *you,* exactly?"

"M-Mech... It grabbed me and... I think it's dislocated."

"You hit the ice pretty hard when it dropped you." Shadow reminded, "Best make sure it isn't *broken too."*

"I'll do that, thanks, sweetie."

Shadow gave her a light smile, but then it faded as he laid down on the floor. "I guess... I guess the agents will be here soon to take me, huh?"

"They don't know you're- Ah!... *H-Here...!*" Sonic whimpered as his mom felt his arm, "Ow ow ow-"

"...I don't feel any breaks, but definitely dislocated. Tails!?"

"Yeah, Mom?"

"Grab a towel out of the drawer too, please."

"What's the towel for?" Sonic asked, and then Silver threw up again. "Oh. Right."

"Right. Make that *two towels,* Baby. One for Silver, one for Sonic."

"Shadow!?"
Rouge's voice came from the back of the house, and the dark hedgehog looked up as the bat skidded into the doorway. "Shadow!"

"Rouge!"
Shadow reached out and wrapped his arms around the bat as she ran over and hugged him tightly. "You're *okay!* I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! G-Go ahead and hit me. I told you that you could hit me if you were right, a-and you were right and *then some!* Just-"

"You *idiot!*" Rouge's grip on him tightened, "I'm just glad you're *okay...!*"

"You're...not *mad?*"

"Oh no, I'm *livid!* But not at *you.*" She pulled back with a smile, "I can't really be mad at you for having a few screws loose, who knows what those government cronies did while you were in stasis."

"Seriously, dude." Sonic put his hands on his hips, "What is it with you and assuming people are mad at you for-*Mmph!*"
He blinked in shock as his mom took the one of the towels from Tails and had wrapped it before putting it in his mouth. "Puh! Mom, what the heck!?"

"You're gonna want to keep that in there, tough guy." Maddie informed, "I'm gonna put your arm back in place."

"Ah..." Knuckles hummed, "My father did this often to warriors when I was young, though we more often used tree bark."

Sonic looked puzzled, but put the towel back into his mouth, biting on it gently as his mom took his arm. He winced and bit down a little tighter with a light grunt. "Wsss ik shiiipoossst to-"

"Okay... One... two... three!"

Sonic's eyes widened and his teeth clamped down on the towel hard as he whined in pain, his arm popping back into the socket with a sharp snap. Tears welled in his eyes, but he fought them back, using his good arm to pull the towel back out. "Augh...! Ow ow ow, that smarts...!"

"And that's why we keep our arms in their sockets where they belong. And see?" She pointed to where little flecks of red were now on the towel, "That could have been your tongue or some cracked teeth right now."

"Augh...! You said you did that with *bark,* Knux...? Geez...!"

"Anything *else* I need to look at?"

Sonic shook his head, "N-No... I'm good...!"

"Good..."
She looked to Silver as he managed to down the ibuprofen, though still looking a little green. He looked miserable, but there wasn't much more she could do for a migraine other than try to keep the light and sound down. She went to the window and closed the curtains, darkening the room a fair bit before returning her attention to the third. "Now... Come here, Shadow. Let me see that leg of yours..."

Rouge helped Shadow to his feet and then he replaced Sonic on the couch as the blue hedgehog moved aside.

"So it hurts to walk on it?"

"Or when something hits it, or a lot of pressure is applied..." His ears folded back against his head, "...Not really helpful."

Sonic nodded, "So that's what happened when the tunnel collapsed... I grabbed your leg and the pain caused you to react. I got shocked-"

"And it made you fire off your *own* blast." Knuckles hummed, "A chain reaction..."

"*Unfortunately...*" Shadow winced as Maddie removed his shoe, and she shook her head. "What's wrong?"

"Your shoes are way to small for you, kiddo... Your toes shouldn't be that curled in. Hopefully we can do something about that..."
Shadow seethed as she felt his leg, her brows furrowing. "Man, hurts that bad just to *touch* it, huh...?"

"S-Sorry. I'm *trying* to be *still*-"

"It's okay, sweetie... but it's also very, very warm and swollen... I'd be surprised if it's not infected. Do you remember anything that might have happened?"

"Before waking up from the capsule...? No..."

"Capsule?"

Shadow nodded, "...I was put in a capsule... stasis sleep... sometime in the nineteen-seventies, I think?"

"DUDE!"
Sonic's eyes were saucers, "That's fifty *years* ago!"

"Shhhhh...!" Silver hissed, his eyes tightly squinted shut. "Not so loud...!"

"I busted him out," Rouge reminded, "Then we just... started to run... We started heading this way when he saw that glow-"

"Right, you mentioned a green glow." Maddie hummed, "Do you see it now, Shadow?"

Shadow squinted a bit, looking around the house. "...Yeah... It's dulled a bit, but definitely still all over the house."

"Weird..." Sonic hummed.

"Not really."
Tails stepped forward, "I remember one of the grownups in my village saying that the ambient Chaos Energy in the air on our planet was green, but finding strong sources of it was rare." He rubbed his chin, "You, Silver, Knuckles, and Shadow *all* appear to give off high levels of Chaos energy, as would Kaia and maybe Obsidian. That many big sources in one place might be enough of a concentration here in Green Hills for Shadow to be able to actually *see* it."

Shadow sighed, putting his head in his hands. "I just... I don't get it. How can I be *made* by *humans,* but be so much like *aliens...?*"

Maddie put a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it gently. "I don't know either, Kiddo... But I'm sure we'll find some way to help you... Let's not worry about it right now, okay? It's been a very, very long day for all of us. How about I get you something to eat and drink?"

"Okay..."

"Alright, what do you like?"

Shadow looked thoughtful for a second, and she supposed that if he was from fifty years in the past, he might be worried something he liked before wasn't around anymore. He then looked up to her again, "Oatmeal. I like oatmeal."

Maddie grinned, "Oatmeal, I can do."

"Just another day in paradise..."

Tower yawned as he leaned against the front of Sheriff Wachowski's cruiser, watching the aftermath that was unfolding before them. He sipped on a cup of coffee the sheriff had offered him, suggesting that this was going to be a long night following a long day.

Tower honestly shouldn't have been surprised.

Agent Aban Stone, former assistant to Dr. Robotnik- or perhaps *still* his assistant in some capacity- was being loaded up in one of the GUN transports, his arms held in cuffs that went up to his elbows and were clearly weighing him down. He was still a bit dazed from whatever Silver had done back at the lake, a concussion at least. He might not even remember what *hit* him, which was fine by Tower. The less people who knew that Silver and his sister existed- much less what the pale hedgehog was *capable of*- the better.

In another transport was the remains of his mecha suit, as well as a large robot that had apparently attacked the agents out in the woods. A few injuries, but no casualties, and it appeared to have only been a distraction for the agents to allow Stone to sneak in on the boys without being disturbed.

"Thank God you remembered what Sonic said about the lake..."
Sheriff Wachowski sipped on his coffee, keeping his voice low as he spoke. "...I can't imagine what might have happened if we'd not made it there when we did."

"Thank God you're such a good driver on snow-packed roads." Tower shook his head, "I grew up in Tennessee, we don't get snow there like we do *here*."

"Get lots of practice the next few months, cuz it ain't leaving for a while."

"Right..." Tower took another sip of his coffee, "You uh... you trust your deputy to be able to calm the masses on his own?"

"Hmm? Wade? Oh yeah, he's actually pretty good at dispersing gawking crowds... Although, if you think he could use help-"

"Pssh. Yeah, that'll go smoothly." Tower smirked, "I told the hunters in town this morning that everything was fine but to keep out of the woods, and then the day ends with a minor invasion by a Robotnik fanboy... How that man has fans, I can't imagine."

"So... *Now* what do we do?"

Tower shook his head, "I dunno... It's gonna be messy, I can tell you that... then again, they haven't actually found him yet."

Both of them sat up straighter as the other GUN agents approached, cutting their conversation short.

"Getting coffee with the local law enforcement, Tower?" Agent Faraday asked.

Tower shrugged, "Might as well, I might need their help with my assignment... And how is *yours* going?"

"*Classified.*" Another officer announced, "Your assignment is to observe the aliens residing in this town, not to pry into other engagements, Agent Tower."

Tower shrugged, "Just a question..."

Sheriff Wachowski put his hand on his hip, "Any ideas on when that *engagement* will get you out of my town?"

"That remains to be seen. But we should expect you to keep your other aliens out of trouble from now on."

"Hmm."

The two men watched the agents return to their task of loading the evidence, and Tower reached into his pocket. "I'm gonna head out and actually get my stuff at my new place, but if something *else* comes up..." He handed the man a small card, "...keep me informed."

"Sure thing, Agent."

Tower passed and headed for his own vehicle, but didn't take his eyes off of the truck where Stone had been loaded until he knew for certain someone else was inside of it with him and the doors were closed and locked. No disappearing into the crowd and wreaking more havoc for him.

Tower started his engine, slowly backing out of the space. "Hope the kid's okay... I hope all of them are, that could've been nasty..."

Chapter End Notes

The trio have made it to safety. The question is... How long will it last...?

Chapter 21: So This Is Normal...?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As soon as the bowl was placed before him, Shadow realized he was absolutely *starving*. Perhaps it was because he hadn't really had the opportunity to eat something substantial since he'd woken up, but he hadn't really *felt* hungry until now. Even with Stone, he must've not felt safe enough to let that guard down.

"That good, huh?" Maddie murmured with a smile, "Glad you're feeling well enough to eat."

"Sorry." Shadow apologized, "Am I going too fast?"

"Just don't make yourself sick, is all. Glad somebody else around here likes oatmeal besides me, though."

"I like it," Tails murmured, "It's just... not as good as Lucky Charms."

"Uh huh... what did you two eat while you were running around?"

Rouge shrugged as she sat on the other side of the table, "Potato chips, coffee and scones when Stone found us... not really much."

"No wonder." Sonic remarked, "I'd have *died* before now if that's all I'd had in four days."

Shadow put another spoonful into his mouth, "As long as it's good food, I'll eat whatever you give me."
He was quiet for another moment, and then swallowed hard, "Do... Do you think the agents will be here soon looking for me?"

"I'm not sure they even know what you look like." Sonic mumbled, "I could say you're my cousin and they wouldn't even... *Hey*..."

Maddie frowned, "Sonic-"

"Mom, it's *perfect!* We could-"

"It's also *lying*." Shadow responded, "I don't want to lie to get out of trouble."

"Even if the alternative is to be put back in the icebox?"

Shadow's ears folded back a bit, "...Yes. Even then..."

Knuckles walked over, putting a hand on Shadow's shoulder, "You are a noble warrior, Shadow the Hedgehog. It would be most unfortunate for this to transpire."

"Thanks." Shadow finished off the oatmeal and then carefully climbed down from the stool, just in time to hear a soft sound from the hall. "Hmm? What's *that?*"

Maddie smiled a bit, "Sounds like the baby's awake-"

Sonic gasped, "Oh my gosh! Yes! Shadow, you *have* to meet Obbie!"

Shadow's eyes widened, "I-Is that the dog I ran into last night...!?"

"Hmm? Oh no, that's *Ozzie.* He's here too, but he's really friendly!"

Shadow was hesitant, but he hobbled after the group as they made their way to the hall. Maddie went to open the door and Ozzie came hurrying out of the room, tail wagging. He sniffed around a bit, and then found Rouge and Shadow, walking up to them.

"E-Easy! Easy...!" Shadow whimpered as the dog came to him directly, sniffing and nudging the dark hedgehog with his nose. Shadow then jumped as he started to lick his face, "Ack! N-No! Stop! Mind your manners!"

Sonic giggled, grabbing Ozzie's collar and pulling him back. "Alright, Ozzie. That's enough."

Shadow scrubbed the slobber clean from his face, and then looked up as Maddie once more exited the room, a small shape in her arms.

Sonic was bouncing on his toes as he watched his mom bend down, allowing Rouge and Shadow to look at the baby Sonic had called Obbie.

"Oh my gosh..." Rouge mumbled with wide eyes.

"Rouge, Shadow, meet Obsidian. Obbie for short."

Shadow crept a little closer, "He... Looks like *me...!*"

If Shadow had ever been a baby hedgehog and had blue streaks and green eyes rather than his red, this is probably how he would look. Obsidian looked back at him with the same wide-eyed expression, and then reached out for him.

"Aww...!" Tails cooed, "He wants you to *hold him,* Shadow!"

Maddie smiled, "Maybe we should have you sit down on the couch before we do that."

They all headed to the living room, and Sonic looked where the fourth hedgehog had been, now absent. "Hey, where's Silver?"

"While you guys were introducing Ozzie to Shadow, I swapped him into our room so he could have some peace and quiet. Best for a migraine."

Shadow pulled himself up onto the couch as Obsidian continued to reach for him, and Sonic sat down beside him as Maddie then carefully handed the tiny hedgehog off. "Be careful, he likes to grab onto things."

Shadow held the tiny hedgehog in his lap, he was so light! His fingers were so tiny, brushing Shadow's muzzle as he looked back. "Is he your little brother, Sonic?"

"Yeah! Well, I mean, not by birth, I don't think. But we adopted him like the rest of us."

"Well that was what I was asking... Biological." Shadow murmured, "Funny that he looks like *me,* but his streaks and eyes are *your* coloring."

Sonic raised his hands, "Hey, I am *not* the father."

"Then who *is?*"

Tails shrugged, "Our dad found him on a farm outside of town when he was *maybe* a day old. No mom, no dad, no siblings, no idea where he came from. He's been with us ever since."

"But he's got his own powers too." Sonic informed, "You know how I mentioned that vision Tails and Knuckles saw about you? Obbie was the one who created the dreamscape they saw that vision in."

"Among other things." Knuckles murmured solemnly.

Shadow's eyes widened a bit, and then he looked to Obsidian once more. "You told them about me, huh...? How did you *know* about me, little one...?"

Obsidian reached out, putting his hand on Shadow's muzzle. He didn't speak, but Shadow could see it... there was understanding in his gaze, and perhaps... a little mischief. This tiny hoglet knew something... or perhaps a *lot* of something-

Smack!

"Ow!"
Shadow pulled back a little as Obsidian smacked his nose with his hand, shaking his head and looking to the toddler who'd burst into laughter and appeared to be winding up to do it again. "Oh, so you're a fan of slapstick humor, huh? Sorry, but I don't think that's a habit you should be forming... Did *you* send me those visions of Sonic, Obsidian?"

"What do you mean?"

Shadow's brows furrowed, "Ever since I woke up from the capsule, I've been getting these... *images* in my head. I didn't know who it was at first, but... it was *you,* Sonic... But... golden? Reaching out for me, trying to catch me when I was falling." He crossed his arms, "A-And then I saw Silver in the same way- just for a moment- when he was holding up that shield over us at the lake... What do they *mean...?*"

Sonic shook his head, "I don't know. I mean... I went gold that one time I used all seven of the Chaos Emeralds to stop Robotnik, but... You weren't there. And... I never had to catch you when I was like that."

"Remember the three pillars in that final vision we saw?" Tails reminded, "There was you, and Silver, and then a third we didn't recognize... maybe it was supposed to be Shadow.

Maybe it's all to say that the three of you can use the Chaos Emeralds like that."

"But it seemed so... *ethereal.* Like... like a dream..." Shadow shook his head, "...I don't understand anything that's happened to me since I woke up... or even who I am anymore..."

Rouge put a hand on his shoulder, "I don't either, Shadow... But it'll be okay. If everything hits the fan, we can just teleport away with the stone, right?"

Shadow shook his head, "I don't have the Chaos Emerald anymore."

"*You what!?*"
Rouge and Knuckles looked to each other as both of them exclaimed in unison, but then Rouge continued. "What do you mean you don't have it!? Did *Stone* get it!?"

"N-No! No, I..." Shadow's ears folded back a bit against his head, "W-When we were fighting Stone back at the lake, I threw it into the lake through a hole he made in the ice. It's... It's at the bottom of the lake by now. I had to make sure he *didn't* get it."

"Ah..." Knuckles settled back into a solemn state, giving a nod. "Very well. A wise decision."

"*Wise?* How is that *wise?*" Rouge complained, "That thing's too *important* to just sit at the bottom of a frozen lake-"

"*Kaia's* down there!" Tails announced, "She's a friend of ours and a water goddess from our planet. She's the one who *made* the Chaos Emeralds."

"If the Chaos Emerald is with her, it could not be in safer hands..." Knuckles hummed, "...And it means that at least part of what my ancestors stole from her all those centuries ago has been returned to her."

Rouge didn't seem fully convinced, but Shadow was intrigued by this news. "Sonic, is *that* why you were trying to reach the lake? In hopes that this water goddess could help us?"

Sonic nodded, "Stone didn't know about her, and I guess he *still* doesn't... but if anyone could have turned that thing to scrap metal, it was Kaia... Or Silver apparently."

Shadow squirmed in his seat, "Yeah... I'll have to apologize to him properly for that later..." He paused as Obbie began to fuss and squirm a bit in his arms, and then handed him back to Maddie. "I'm not sure what happened there-"

"It's okay, Shadow." Maddie assured, "Babies are just fussy sometimes..." She then turned as the phone rang, and Shadow ducked deeper into the couch as she answered it.

"What if it's the government looking for me...!?" He hissed as Sonic gave him a confused look.

"Wachowski residence..." Maddie gave the boys a wink as she said the next thing, "*...Allison!*"

Tails smiled, "It's okay, Shadow. It's just Miss Allison. Silver and Blaze live with her."

Shadow relaxed a little.

"...Yes, he's here with me. Nasty migraine though. Figured he could just stay here for the night and then head back over tomorrow when he's feeling better-"

Sonic's face lit up and he pumped his good arm, "*Sleepover!*"

"SHHHH!" Tails hissed with a grin, "Mom's on the phone...! But I'll help you get the pillows and blankets down from our room."

Shadow watched the two middle Wachowski boys hurry from the living room and into the hall, and Knuckles shook his head. "What exactly do you *do* at a sleepover?"

Knuckles shrugged, "Never attended one formally, I suppose. But surely it involves actually sleeping..."

"So this is what a normal day for you is like?"

"No. No it is not."

Tom was about ready to drop by the time he entered the house that night. Paperwork and evaluations with the GUN agents took far longer than he thought it should have, and it was well past seven before he was able to go home.

Trudging up the steps towards the front porch, he could feel more snow was on its way, which he knew would delay the agents from further search. For now, they were pulling out to secure Stone and the rest of his assets. He stomped snow from his boots, turned the knob, and stepped into the warmth of the house. "I'm home..." He hummed, looking around.

"Dada!"
Obsidian toddled his way from the kitchen, arms up and reaching for him with a huge grin. Tom smirked, bending down and picking up the tiny hedgehog, setting him in the crook of his arm as he peered into the kitchen.

"Welcome back." Maddie greeted, pausing from her task of washing dishes to plant a kiss on his cheek. "I saved you some spaghetti, it's in the fridge."

"Thanks, Babe."
He looked to the living room, seeing the couch, chairs, and even the floor were occupied by a bunch of kids all watching the television. Knuckles sat in the armchair, with the Master Emerald in its satchel beside him. Silver was on the couch and already asleep, while a female white bat was perched on the arm of the couch at the other end. Sonic and Tails were settled on the floor, each one holding a controller as they played, and in the middle was Shadow, his chin resting in his hands as he watched the other two play curiously. "Settled in for the night?"

"Yup. Silver was sick from a migraine when they got back, Shadow's too spooked to even go near the windows right now, and Rouge..." Maddie smiled as she took their youngest from his

dad, "...She wouldn't leave without him."

"Hmm... Full house tonight."

"Right."

Tom went to the fridge and pulled out the leftovers mentioned, putting them in the microwave before crashing onto one of the bar stools. "Long day... And tomorrow will probably be even longer."

"I know... I wanna at least *try* to sneak Shadow to the clinic tomorrow morning to get his leg looked at. Even if everything goes south, we should at least know what injuries he has..."

"With the snow coming back in, I wouldn't be surprised if the agents don't get out in it until later. Just be careful, Maddie."

"Of course... I'll have to do a hand-off at the clinic to pass Silver back off to Allison anyway..."

Tom looked back to the newest hedgehog in town as Shadow yawned, mumbling something to Sonic who smiled as he responded. "...He's just a little kid... We get attached too easily."

"Agreed."

Chapter End Notes

All four of the hedgehog boys have been introduced to one another! Only got one more chapter planned for this one, but it's not the end of the story, I promise! Just got to a good stopping point to plan for the next part-

Chapter 22: One Question Answered, More Questions Asked

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As interesting as the *'video games'* Sonic and Tails had been showing him were, Shadow found himself wiped out, and he slumped into a deep sleep before the sun was all the way down. No nightmares, no sudden flickers of panic that pulled him back out, just dead to the world.

It wasn't until a gentle hand touched his head and stroked his quills that he stirred, the drowsiness lingering in his eyes as he opened them. "Mmm... What...?"

"Shadow, sweetie..."
Shadow's eyes searched the darkness until he found the source of the voice, and then he rubbed the sleep from them and sat up as Maddie crouched over him. "Good morning..."

"Mmm... morning already...?"
He looked out the window, seeing the sky was still dark, but he heard movement and saw Silver was also pulling himself up.

"I'm gonna take you and Silver down to the clinic so I can hand him off to Allison and get a better look at your leg. I know it's early, but-"

"N-No... I'm up." Shadow yawned, taking her hand as she helped him to his feet. He limped away from where Sonic and Tails still slumbered on the floor, finding Rouge shoving a pastry in her mouth in the kitchen. "You're up *too?*"

"Been up..." Rouge admitted, "I'm nocturnal."

Maddie gave the bat a smirk, and then handed both Shadow and Silver a pastry. "Here, you can eat your pop-tarts on the way."

Both hedgehogs nodded and yawned, following her towards the front door. The air that blew in was frigid and harsh, but they quickly hurried out onto the porch and then made their way to the car. "Drive slow, Miss Maddie..." Silver hummed, "The roads can be treacherous with this much snow."

"I'll keep that in mind, Silver, thanks."

The ride was without much conversation, both of the teenage hedgehogs sitting in their seats, trying their best not to fall asleep again. Silver failed, but with how sick he'd been the day before, Shadow wasn't really surprised he was exhausted. He peeked out the window cautiously, trying to make sure he wasn't seen, but there was hardly a soul on the streets- in cars or on the sidewalks.

Thank goodness for snow.

The van crunched in the frozen substance as it came to a stop in the parking lot, only one other car present. Maddie helped them out to the back door, unlocked it, and then all three of them slipped inside.

Shadow looked around the dark halls as he limped after the woman. The air smelled sterile... and he didn't like that smell. Like a lot of other things, the scent seemed to be pulling on his memory, trying to bring up something he had locked away... or someone had locked away for him.

He rubbed his arms, his ears folding back a bit. "...I'm not sure I like this place."

"I'm sure it doesn't make you comfortable, Shadow, but I promise I won't do anything you don't agree to."

Shadow nodded, and then looked up as he heard other footsteps.

"Miss Maddie?"
A purple cat came running around the corner, her eyes lighting up as she saw Silver. "Silver! You are alright!"

"Y-Yeah, I-oof!" Silver winced as the cat crashed into him, her arms tightly wrapped around him. "Yeah... I'm okay, Blaze."

"I was so worried! You left the clinic so quickly, and then I did not hear anything about you, and-"

"Hey, it's okay..." Silver pulled his arms free to hug her back, "...I'm just fine- *GYAH!*" He winced, as did Shadow, as the hall was suddenly lit up. "*Augh... Lights...!*"

"Sorry, kiddos."
Another woman appeared at the end of the hall, a smile on her face. "Hello, you must be Shadow. Rouge talked a lot about you."

"Y-Yeah... That's me."

Blaze released Silver and came to Shadow, taking his hand with both of her own and shaking it gently. "Greetings, I am Blaze. Silver and I live with Miss Allison."

"Hello, Blaze."

Maddie smiled at the trio of children, and then motioned for Shadow to follow as Blaze took Silver's hand and they left the hall with their caretaker. "Come on, let's get a look at that leg..."

Shadow nodded, limping after her. "What kind of... tests are you going to do on me?"

"I'll draw a little blood and look for infection, and an x-ray. We'll see what we can find out from that, plus a check-up to get an idea of your overall health."

Shadow rubbed his arms again, "Okay... And if it gets too much... I can say stop and you'll *listen* to me?"

Maddie paused, bending down to his level. "Of course, Sweetheart. I want you to be able to trust me, and that means that I'll respect your comfort levels. If it's too much, I'll stop..."

Shadow swallowed, "...*They didn't...* That's all."

"You remember?"

"Not really, it's just..." Shadow looked to his hands and then closed them into fists, "...I just *know it* somehow."

"Fair enough... Come on, x-ray's first."

Maddie led the way into one of the rooms, where Shadow saw a large table with a machine hovering over it. "So... how does this machine work?"

"It's an X-Ray machine, it'll take pictures of the inside of your leg so we can find out what's causing your leg to hurt."

Shadow looked at the machine with curiosity, "Pictures of the inside...? Does it hurt?"

"No, not at all."
Maddie offered her hands, and Shadow hesitantly allowed her to pick him up, putting him up on the table. As he sat down on it, he ran his hand over it slowly. It was plush and soft, with a sheet of paper covering the top... Why had he expected it to be metal, with clasps to keep his limbs in place?

"Okay, now just lay down here..." She helped him lie down on his back, facing up at the ceiling, before pulling the machine lower and closer to his injured leg. "Just keep still for a second while I use the machine to take pictures."

"Okay..." Shadow closed his eyes, trying to think of something else, something better...

Maddie took several images, carefully shifting the leg so she could get as effective of an angle as possible. Once done, she took Shadow into another room to collect a small blood sample to check the cell count for infection, and give him a more thorough lookover than she'd done at the house. Shadow didn't talk, but did everything she asked of him, and seemed grateful when she was finished. She took him into one of the offices were Silver and Blaze already were, and Blaze was more than willing to share the colored pencils so that all three of them could draw.

The sun was beginning to lighten the sky now, and as Maddie headed for the back room to examine the x-ray results, she heard the back door open. She peered around the corner, seeing Tom and Agent Tower both entering the building. "Hon?"

"I was just stopping by on my way in, and *he*-" Tom pointed to Tower, "-Had some things he wanted to discuss with you, apparently."

"Uh huh..." Allison muttered with a glare, "...Fine, but I'm watching you."

Maddie rolled her eyes, "The kids are all in the office coloring, and we were just about to check the results."

"Sounds like a plan." Agent Tower tilted his head, "Mind if I take a peek?"

The four adults made their way into the dark room, Maddie reaching into the folder and pulling out two of the prints and placing them up on the light box. "Okay... Let's see what we've... *got.*" Maddie's eyes widened as she looked at the image, "Oh my god-"

Agent Tower nodded as he agreed with the veterinarian, "Well there's your *problem,* right there."

Tom leaned over his wife's shoulder, "...Is that-"

"Yeah, Tom... The poor baby's got *bullet shrapnel* in his leg. *Surely* they *knew* about this when they put him in stasis, right? He's spent fifty years with shrapnel in his leg, it's no wonder he can't walk on it!"

"So what do we do?"

"Remove it, obviously-"

"Would that even help?" Allison asked, "The level of pain it's bringing him just to have someone *touch* his leg? Definite infection even *without* looking at the white blood cell count, and even if we *do* remove the shrapnel, the chances of the existing nerve damage still keeping him crippled is high." Her brows furrowed, "Maddie, you know what's best for him."

"We can't just *amputate* his leg, Allison! He barely knows me and has been through enough already. What would he think if I just decided to cut part of his body off? Not to mention we don't have the right kind of staff for that sort of procedure here in Green Hills, not on a humanoid hedgehog, anyways-"

"Then we ask someone *else* to help."

"Who? Who could we trust with that and not give him away?"

Tom shrugged, tilting his head to the side. "What about Dr. Riley?"

"Tom-"

"Maddie," Allison interrupted, "You know my dad's one of the best surgeons in the business. Plus, he and my mom are both coming into town in the next few days for the holidays. *Perfect timing.*" She shrugged, "They're gonna find out anyway, my mom's already accidentally talked to Blaze on the phone when she answered it a few weeks ago."

Agent Tower sighed, "See? Told ya it would be messy... So Miss Riley's dad comes into town, we explain the situation, see if he'll perform the procedure. Try to keep it as quiet as possible."

"While the government agents are still crawling around? Then what? He can't run."

"He can't run right now either, Mads." Tom put his hands on her shoulders, "We aren't making a decision today, but think about it..."

Maddie grumbled, grabbing her husband's hands and squeezing them. "...I'll think about it..."

"Good... In the meantime, what was it you wanted to talk to us about, Tower?"

Agent Tower crossed his arms, looking at the images once more. "...I'm not really sure Shadow's the one my fellow agents are looking for..."

"What do you mean?"

Agent Tower stood up a little straighter, "Listen, the entirety of Project Shadow is kept *very, very private.* Only a handful of people would have known how Gerald managed it. Somehow, Gerald makes this creature, this *'ultimate lifeform',* with powers beyond anything anyone has ever seen. The government wants it for their own uses, so they attack the ARK in an effort to capture it."

"Yes...?"

"We haven't found a way to splice nature and make a whole new being even *now* with our advanced technology, especially not one with a conscience and sense of right and wrong. A sense of self, and yet we're supposed to believe that he managed it *fifty years ago? But-*"

He pointed to Tom, "A little over a year ago, Sonic appears on the scene. He's a hedgehog, just like Shadow- but an alien from another world- who got here through a controlled wormhole in time and space, and possesses a power that is *similar* to that of Shadow's, but manifests in a different way."

Tom nodded slowly, "I see... You think Shadow might not be a result of science at all."

"It makes more sense than what we were *told* if you really think about it. Professor Robotnik is struggling to make a viable specimen, the government is threatening to cut his funding, to stop his efforts. Then, out of nowhere, this tiny, little, baby hedgehog is warped onto the space station from who knows where. Nobody knows where he came from, so it's the perfect ruse; reveal Shadow as his successful creation, continue to receive his funding, and maybe find what he's looking for through experimentation on Shadow as he grows."

Allison hummed, "What he says makes sense... But how could we *prove* that?"

"Working on that. It may get me in loads of trouble, but if it can keep that kid safe... Worth it."

The four adults looked to each other, and then nodded. "Worth it."

Shadow wasn't really drawing pictures or coloring like Blaze or Silver were- he was writing. Writing down everything he knew and could remember about himself.

I grew up on a space station called Space Colony Ark. I was raised by Professor Robotnik and his granddaughter Maria, who was like my sister.

A group of humans wanted to take me, so they attacked the station and hurt people... I was captured and put in cold sleep.

I was woken up by Rouge fifty years later and met by... I guess it would be Maria's cousin, Dr. Robotnik- his friend Stone. (Is friend right? He seemed to be more than that)

My mom-

Shadow paused, his pencil still pressed to the paper where he'd finished the last letter. "Mom...?" He whispered. Why had he written that? He didn't have a mom, or at least, Agent Stone hadn't *mentioned* that Professor Robotnik had a wife who'd helped raise him. He supposed he *must have* at some point if he had grandchildren... He set that thought aside, skipping to the next line.

They... didn't respect my boundaries. I don't like labs or tests because they didn't stop when I asked.

He remembered and yet he didn't. He couldn't remember any particular moments of it happening, but the fear that had crept into his chest the moment he smelled the inside of the clinic, the moment he'd seen the x-ray table and been surprised it wasn't designed to keep him from escaping... He didn't like any of it. It meant that he'd been held down, forced to do things he didn't want to, perhaps even hurt, when he was little... and it was still affecting him.

Of course he had, he'd been put in a freezer for fifty years, surely he hadn't *consented* to that.

"Shadow?"
Shadow looked up, seeing both Silver and Blaze looking at him. "Are you alright?" Blaze asked, "You are trembling."

Shadow looked down at his hands and realized he was shaking, his teeth clenched like he was cold and shivering. "I...I don't know..." he admitted, trying to shake it off. "I just... I don't like this place."

"Do not be afraid, though we understand your apprehension towards this place."

"You *do?"* Shadow realized he knew nothing about the siblings, "Were you... hurt too?"

"Not like you." Silver replied, "But the two of us grew up fighting to survive. Our home was devastated, and we only had each other." He rubbed his arms, "Food was scarce, as was safe places to rest... It has only been a short amount of time since we arrived here, but we are still having to get used to the fact that food is not to hard to find here. Miss Allison has to remind us not to hoard food in places, as if we expect it to not be there when we need it later."

"All of this is to say that each of us has parts of our past that we are still having to deal with." Blaze wrung her hands together, "...Scars take time to heal..."

Shadow nodded slowly, "...How did you come here?"

"We do not know that as of yet... Perhaps fate stepped in on our behalf, but one moment we were scavenging for scraps amongst the ruins, and then the next... we awoke in the mountains outside of Green Hills. There was a light... but we have chosen not to worry about how we came here, for it is better here than it was where we came from."

Shadow rubbed his arms, closing his eyes. "I...I don't know where I came from... I've been told I was made, but I don't know how that can be so and yet look so much like I came from your world... I don't remember who I am or what I'm supposed to do. What Stone told me might have been wrong, but it also feels right too? I..." He shook his head.

"Do not fret over the past, Shadow." Silver encouraged, "Who you were then does not make who you are now... Who do you want to be now?"

"...I want to be good."

Silver smiled, "Well, I think you're doing pretty well of that thus far."

Shadow smiled a little, "Thanks... Do you really think we can get the agents to leave me alone?"

"I don't know what the future may hold, but I *do* know that the adults will do everything they can to keep you safe."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

Chapter End Notes

And this is where we'll be pausing for now. Looking back, I think the accidental seven-month break I took from this in the middle was a good thing, it kept me from getting too burnt out, but I wanted to finish this part up before the holiday season gets going in a few weeks, because then my job will be getting more hectic (I work retail) and I will be trying to focus more on that and not on my stories probably.

We will be back eventually, I promise! But for now, I leave you with this to ponder over... :)

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